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WAR STORIES IN PICTURES

A STIRLING CALLED SATAN

Stars of Soccer — Jim Melrose

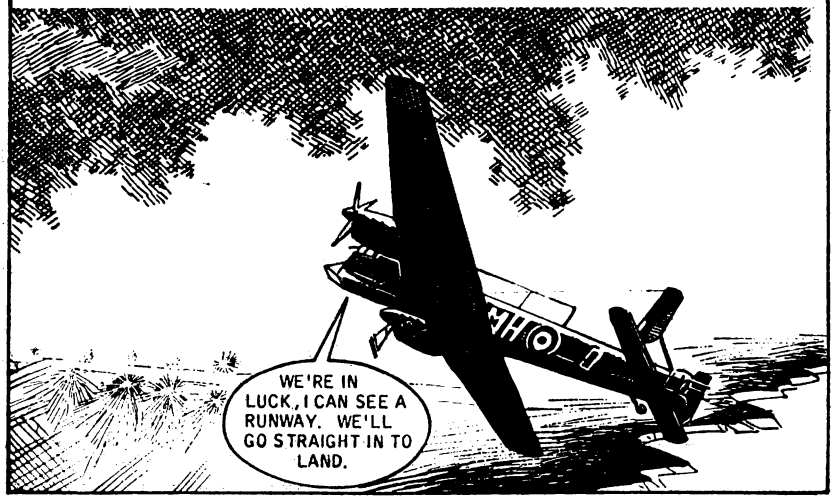
A STIRLING CALLED SATAN

First published 1974

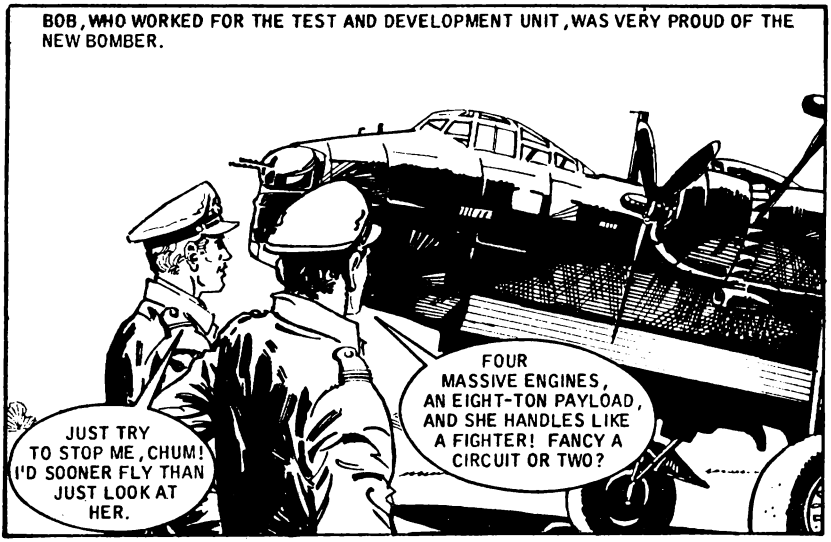
HIS TROUBLES REALLY BEGAN MUCH EARLIER, WHILE HE WAS FLYING WHITLEYS. HE LOOKED ROUND TO FIND HIS NAVIGATOR, SERGEANT "TODDY" McKENZIE, DEEPLY ENGROSSED IN HIS WORK.

THE RADIO OPERATOR, STAN BLYTHE, CROSSED HIS FINGERS AND SMILED GRIMLY AT HIS GREAT PAL, GUNNER REX PARKER.

PHIL NEWTON, THE TAIL GUNNER, SIGHED WITH RELIEF AS THEY CROSSED THE COAST. BUT THEN THE AILING ENGINE SPLUTTERED AND PACKED UP COMPLETELY.

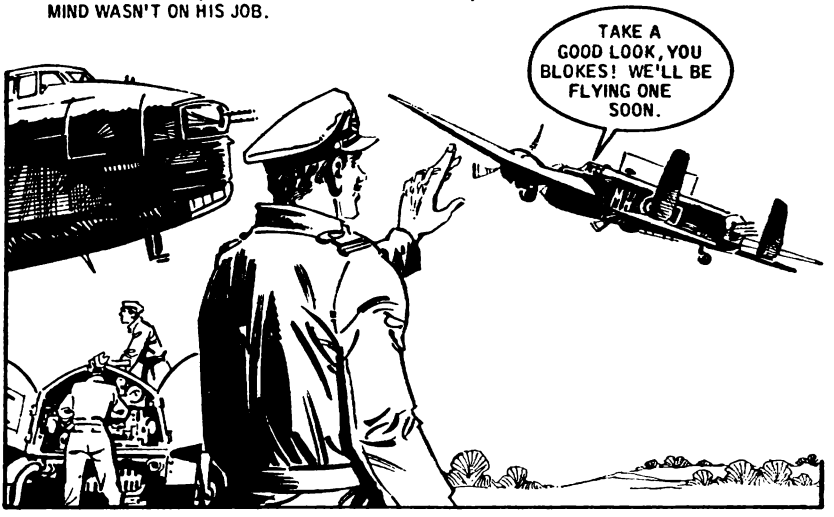


FLASHING HIS LIGHTS TO INDICATE AN EMERGENCY, SAM TOUCHED DOWN SMOOTHLY ON THE UNFAMILIAR AIRFIELD.
A PLACE CALLED WINKLETON – IT'S A NON-OPERATIONAL AIRFIELD, SO WE'RE LUCKY EVERYONE WASN'T IN BED.
JUST IN TIME, THE OTHER ENGINE WAS STARTING TO OVERHEAT. WHERE ARE WE, TODDY?
AS THEY PREPARED TO LEAVE THE AIRFIELD, TODDY NOTICED AN UNFAMILIAR AIRCRAFT.
HEY, LOOK – WHAT'S THAT MONSTER KITE?
SEARCH ME. MUST BE ON THE SECRET LIST. WONDER IF THEY'D SWOP IT FOR OUR BUS?
FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT BOB RAMSAY, AN OLD FRIEND, WAS STATIONED AT WINKLETON, AND THEY MET AT BREAKFAST.
WHAT'S THAT LOVELY FOUR-ENGINED JOB BY THE HANGARS, BOB?
A STIRLING, AND IT'LL SOON BE OPERATIONAL. I'LL SHOW YOU ROUND...


BOB, WHO WORKED FOR THE TEST AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT, WAS VERY PROUD OF THE NEW BOMBER.
FOUR MASSIVE ENGINES, AN EIGHT-TON PAYLOAD, AND SHE HANDLES LIKE A FIGHTER! FANCY A CIRCUIT OR TWO?
JUST TRY TO STOP ME, CHUM! I'D SOONER FLY THAN JUST LOOK AT HER.

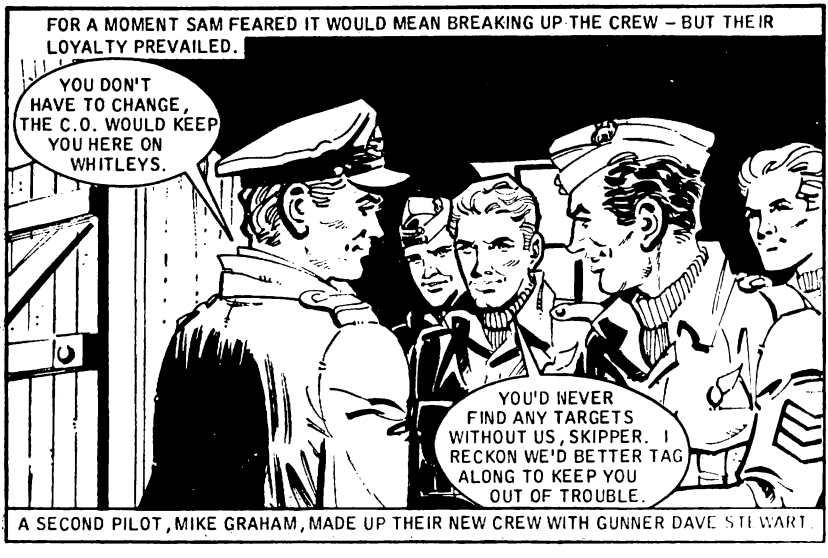
A SHORT FLIGHT CONFIRMED SAM'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS.
SHE'S A DREAM, BOB! I'D LIKE TO GET MY HANDS ON ONE OF MY OWN.
THEY'RE PICKING CREWS FOR THE SQUADRONS SOON, AND YOU SHOULD STAND A GOOD CHANCE WITH ALL YOUR OPERATIONAL EXPERIENCE.

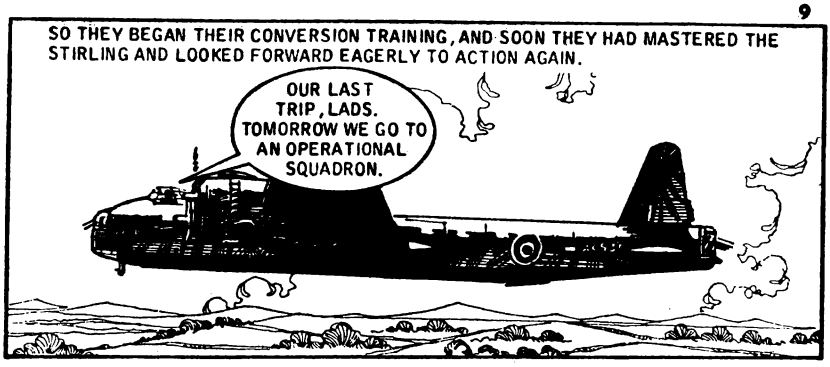
LATER THAT DAY, WITH THE WHITLEY REPAIRED, THEY LEFT FOR HOME – BUT SAM'S MIND WASN'T ON HIS JOB.

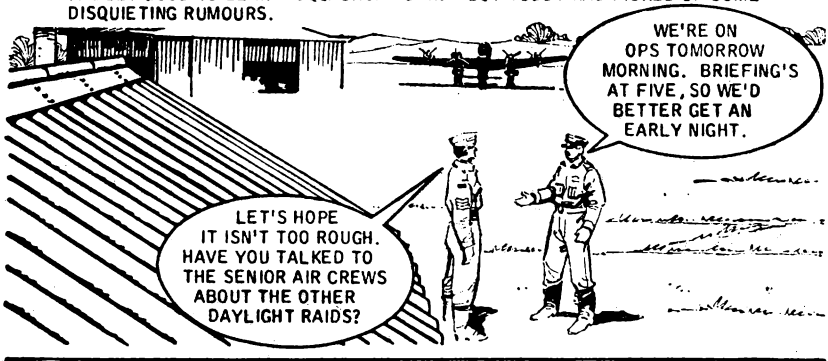


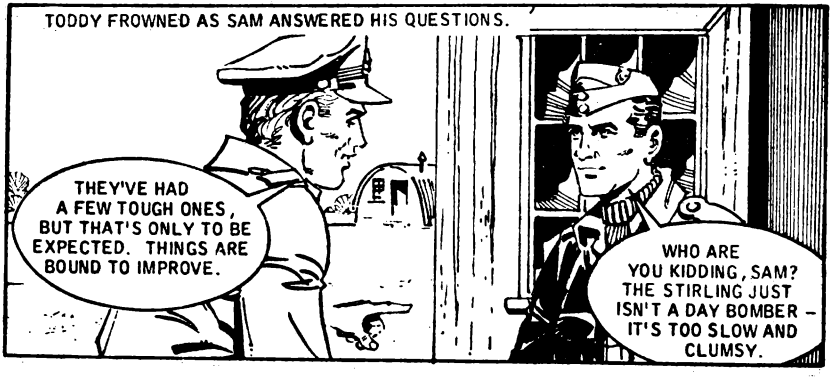
FOR SEVERAL WEEKS SAM PESTERED THE AUTHORITIES, UNTIL EVENTUALLY HIS PERSISTENCE GOT RESULTS.

BUT THE CREW DIDN'T SEEM TO SHARE HIS ENTHUSIASM – ESPECIALLY TODDY McKENZIE AND PHIL NEWTON THE TAIL GUNNER.
WE'RE ASKING FOR TROUBLE, CHANGING SQUADRONS IN THE MIDDLE OF A TOUR.
TODDY'S RIGHT, SKIPPER. WE'RE USED TO WHITLEYS, AND WE'LL BE NEW BOYS AGAIN ON STIRLINGS.

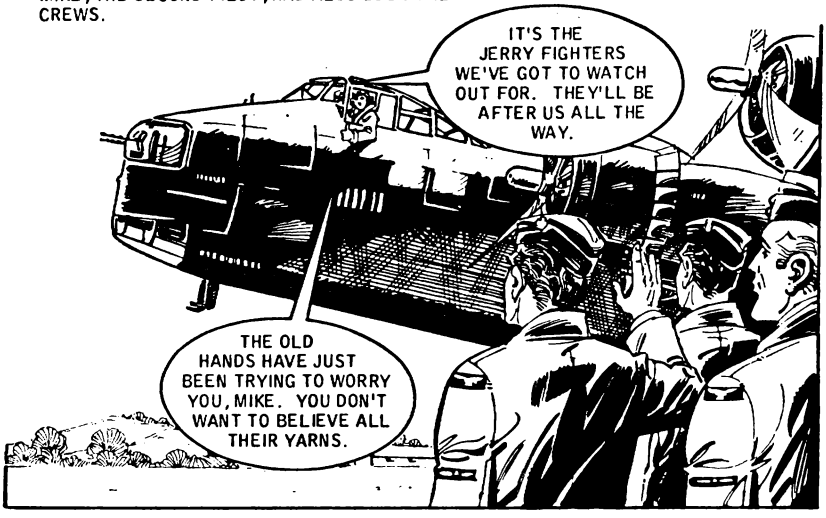

FOR A MOMENT SAM FEARED IT WOULD MEAN BREAKING UP THE CREW – BUT THEIR LOYALTY PREVAILED.
YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHANGE, THE C.O. WOULD KEEP YOU HERE ON WHITLEYS.
YOU'D NEVER FIND ANY TARGETS WITHOUT US, SKIPPER. I RECKON WE'D BETTER TAG ALONG TO KEEP YOU OUT OF TROUBLE.
A SECOND PILOT, MIKE GRAHAM, MADE UP THEIR NEW CREW WITH GUNNER DAVE STEWART


SO THEY BEGAN THEIR CONVERSION TRAINING, AND SOON THEY HAD MASTERED THE STIRLING AND LOOKED FORWARD EAGERLY TO ACTION AGAIN.
OUR LAST TRIP, LADS. TOMORROW WE GO TO AN OPERATIONAL SQUADRON.


IT FELT GOOD TO BE IN A SQUADRON AGAIN – BUT TODDY HAD PICKED UP SOME DISQUIETING RUMOURS.
WE'RE ON OPS TOMORROW MORNING. BRIEFING'S AT FIVE, SO WE'D BETTER GET AN EARLY NIGHT.
LET'S HOPE IT ISN'T TOO ROUGH. HAVE YOU TALKED TO THE SENIOR AIR CREWS ABOUT THE OTHER DAYLIGHT RAIDS?

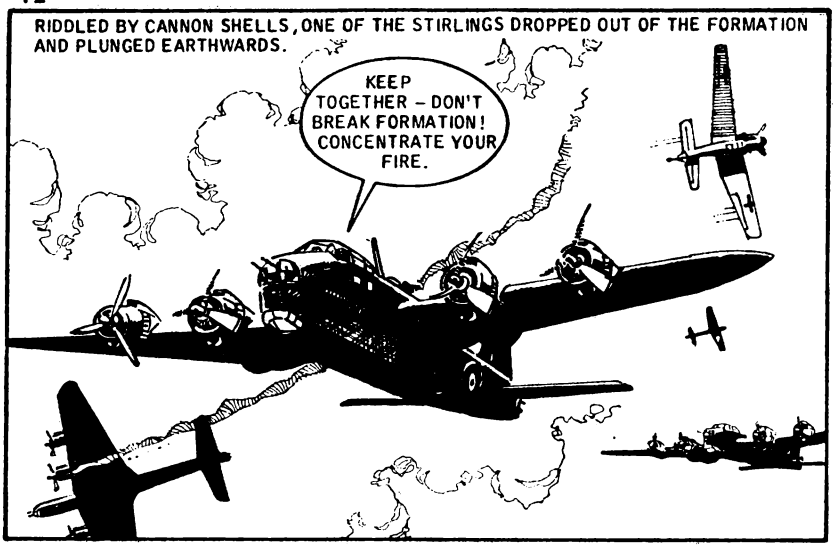

TODDY FROWNED AS SAM ANSWERED HIS QUESTIONS.
THEY'VE HAD A FEW TOUGH ONES, BUT THAT'S ONLY TO BE EXPECTED. THINGS ARE BOUND TO IMPROVE.
WHO ARE YOU KIDDING, SAM? THE STIRLING JUST ISN'T A DAY BOMBER – IT'S TOO SLOW AND CLUMSY.

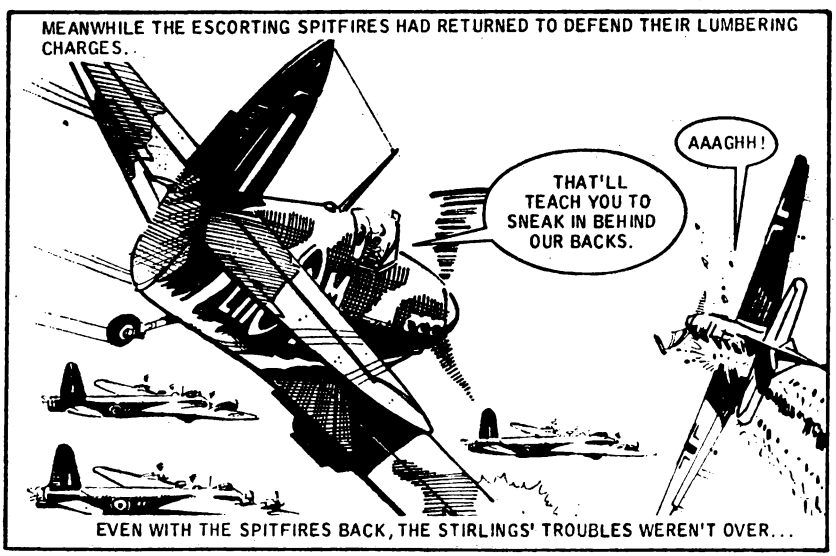
MIKE, THE SECOND PILOT, HAD ALSO BEEN TALKING WITH SOME OF THE EXPERIENCED CREWS.

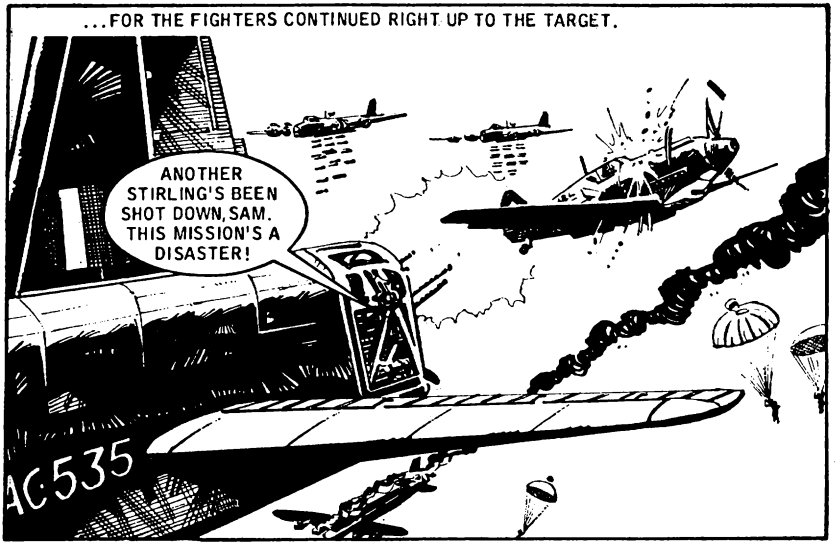


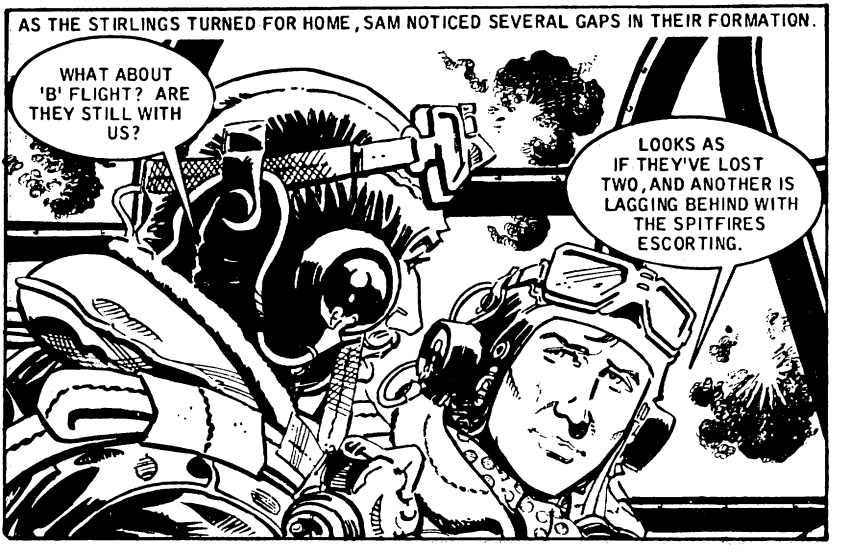
BUT AS THE STIRLING FORCE AND ITS FIGHTER ESCORT RENDEZVOUSED OVER THE FRENCH COAST.

THE SPITFIRES WHEELED IN TIGHT FORMATION AND DIVED TO MEET THE GERMAN THREAT.
AAGH!
FIRST BLOOD TO US, BLUE FORCE!
BUT A SECOND ENEMY FORMATION WAS LYING IN WAIT FOR THE BOMBERS.
GO FOR THE BOMBERS, THEY'RE ON THEIR OWN NOW.
SAM BLINKED AS A MESSERSCHMITT HURTLED OVERHEAD LIKE A THUNDERBOLT.
THEY MUST HAVE DODGED OUR ESCORT.
HE'S GETTING AWFULLY CLOSE. IT'S AS IF OUR KITE IS ATTRACTING THE FIGHTERS.

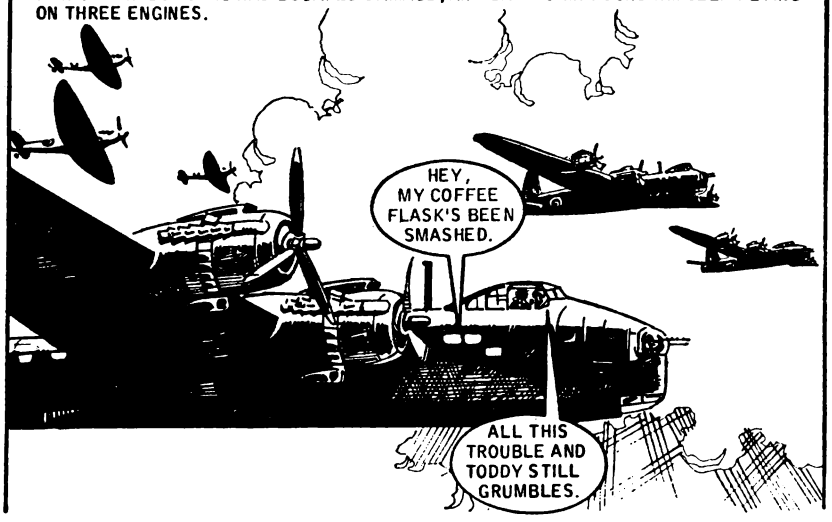

RIDDLED BY CANNON SHELLS, ONE OF THE STIRLINGS DROPPED OUT OF THE FORMATION AND PLUNGED EARTHWARDS.
KEEP TOGETHER – DON'T BREAK FORMATION! CONCENTRATE YOUR FIRE.


MEANWHILE THE ESCORTING SPITFIRES HAD RETURNED TO DEFEND THEIR LUMBERING CHARGES..
THAT'LL TEACH YOU TO SNEAK IN BEHIND OUR BACKS.
AAAGHH!
EVEN WITH THE SPITFIRES BACK, THE STIRLINGS' TROUBLES WEREN'T OVER...

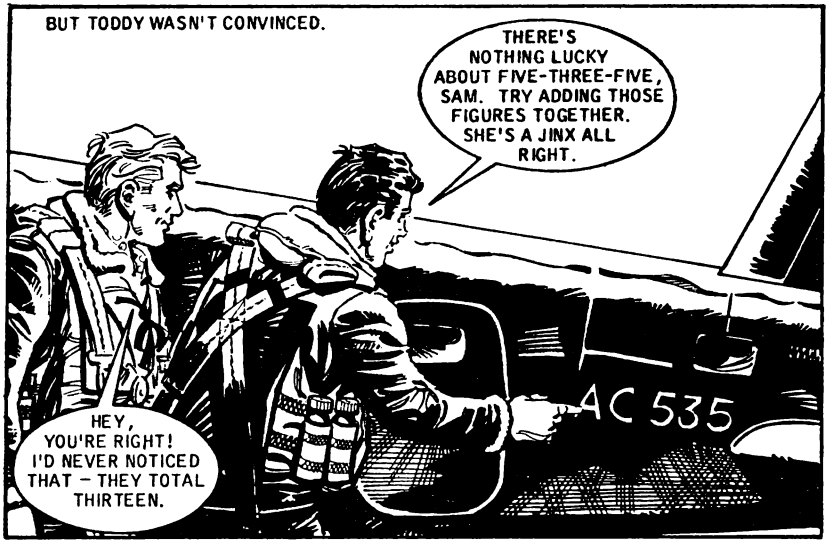

...FOR THE FIGHTERS CONTINUED RIGHT UP TO THE TARGET.
ANOTHER STIRLING'S BEEN SHOT DOWN, SAM. THIS MISSION'S A DISASTER!
AC535

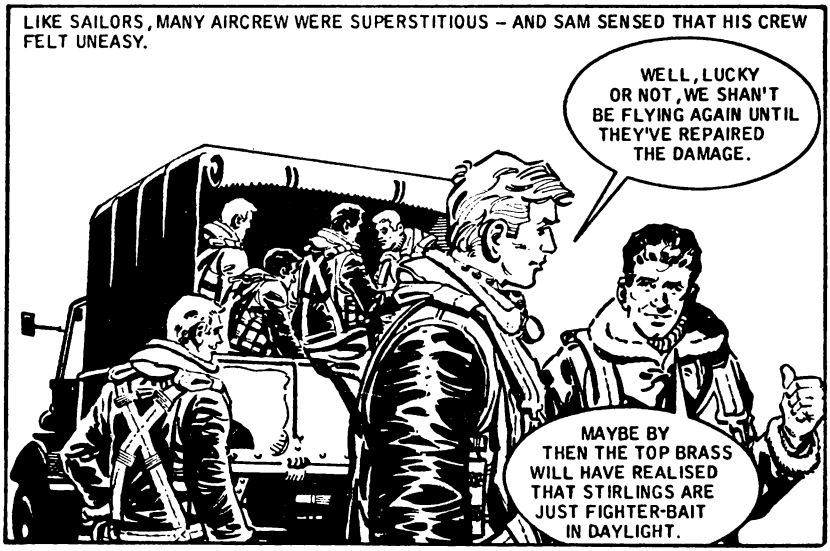

AS THE STIRLINGS TURNED FOR HOME, SAM NOTICED SEVERAL GAPS IN THEIR FORMATION.
WHAT ABOUT 'B' FLIGHT? ARE THEY STILL WITH US?
LOOKS AS IF THEY'VE LOST TWO, AND ANOTHER IS LAGGING BEHIND WITH THE SPITFIRES ESCORTING.

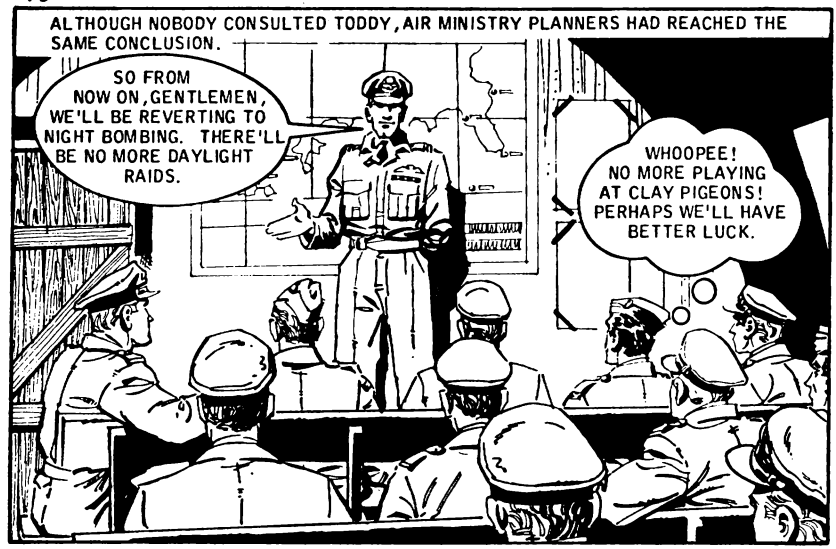
FEW OF THE BOMBERS HAD ESCAPED DAMAGE, AND SAM AGAIN FOUND HIMSELF FLYING ON THREE ENGINES.

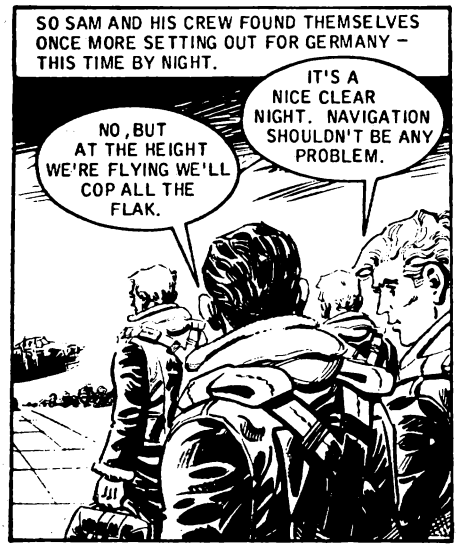


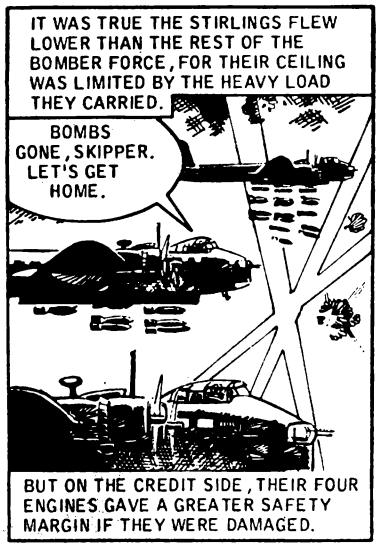
THERE WERE SOME LONG FACES WHEN THEY RETURNED TO BASE, FOR EVERYONE KNEW THE RAID HAD BEEN AN ABSOLUTE DISASTER.


BUT TODDY WASN'T CONVINCED.
THERE'S NOTHING LUCKY ABOUT FIVE-THREE-FIVE, SAM. TRY ADDING THOSE FIGURES TOGETHER. SHE'S A JINX ALL RIGHT.
HEY, YOU'RE RIGHT! I'D NEVER NOTICED THAT – THEY TOTAL THIRTEEN.
AC 535


LIKE SAILORS, MANY AIRCREW WERE SUPERSTITIOUS – AND SAM SENSED THAT HIS CREW FELT UNEASY.
WELL, LUCKY OR NOT, WE SHAN'T BE FLYING AGAIN UNTIL THEY'VE REPAIRED THE DAMAGE.
MAYBE BY THEN THE TOP BRASS WILL HAVE REALISED THAT STIRLINGS ARE JUST FIGHTER-BAIT IN DAYLIGHT.


ALTHOUGH NOBODY CONSULTED TODDY, AIR MINISTRY PLANNERS HAD REACHED THE SAME CONCLUSION.
SO FROM NOW ON, GENTLEMEN, WE'LL BE REVERTING TO NIGHT BOMBING. THERE'LL BE NO MORE DAYLIGHT RAIDS.
WHOOPEE! NO MORE PLAYING AT CLAY PIGEONS! PERHAPS WE'LL HAVE BETTER LUCK.

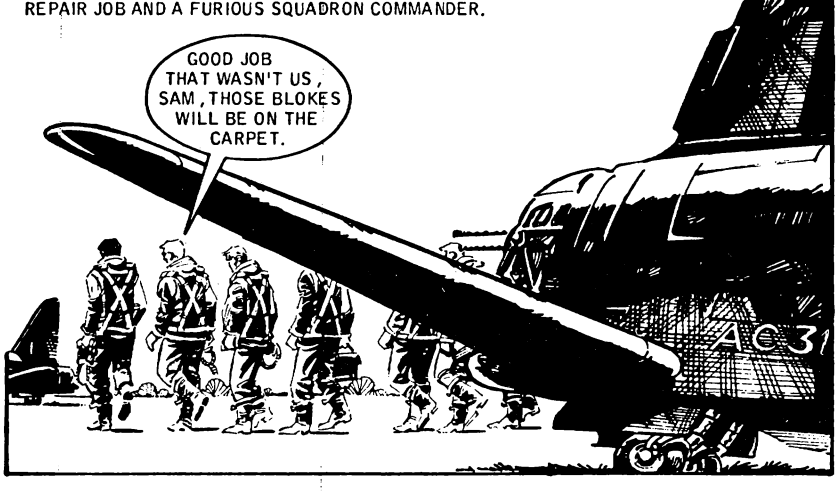

SO SAM AND HIS CREW FOUND THEMSELVES ONCE MORE SETTING OUT FOR GERMANY – THIS TIME BY NIGHT.
IT'S A NICE CLEAR NIGHT. NAVIGATION SHOULDN'T BE ANY PROBLEM.
NO, BUT AT THE HEIGHT WE'RE FLYING WE'LL COP ALL THE FLAK.

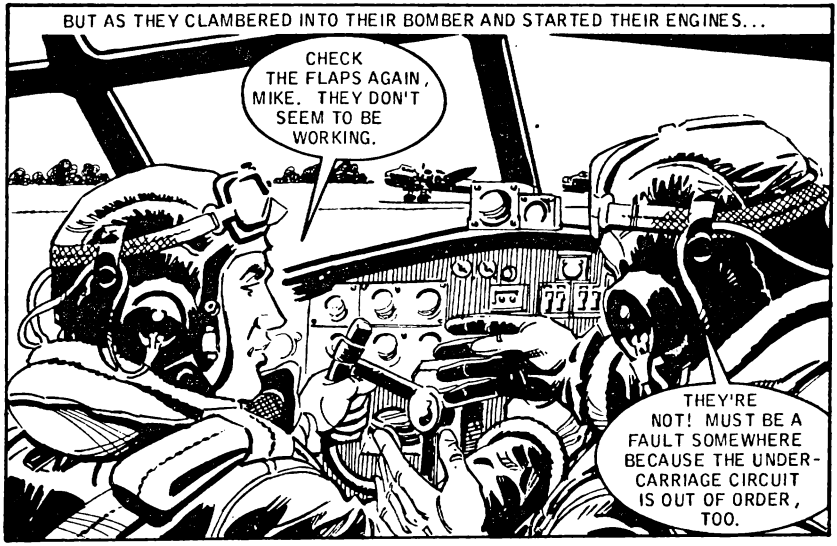

IT WAS TRUE THE STIRLINGS FLEW LOWER THAN THE REST OF THE BOMBER FORCE, FOR THEIR CEILING WAS LIMITED BY THE HEAVY LOAD THEY CARRIED.
BOMBS GONE, SKIPPER. LET'S GET HOME.
BUT ON THE CREDIT SIDE, THEIR FOUR ENGINES GAVE A GREATER SAFETY MARGIN IF THEY WERE DAMAGED.

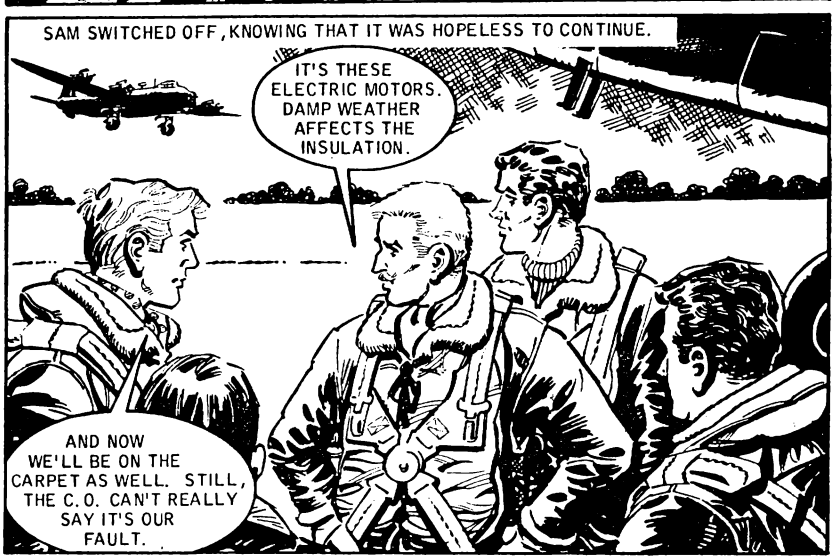
YET DESPITE THEIR FEARS, NOTHING HAPPENED THAT NIGHT.
A NICE QUIET RUN, JUST LIKE OLD TIMES. NONE OF THE FLAK CAME NEAR US.
MAYBE OUR KITE ISN'T JINXED AFTER ALL, SKIPPER. BUT YOU'LL NEVER CONVINCE TODDY OF THAT!
SAM LAUGHED. FIVE-THREE-FIVE A JINX? SURELY THIS WOULD CONVINCE EVEN TODDY.

THE UNEVENTFUL TRIP DID CREW MORALE A LOT OF GOOD – AND THAT WAS WHAT THE PLANNERS INTENDED.
THIS IS A VITAL JOB SO IT'S GOT TO BE MAXIMUM EFFORT. WE'RE PUTTING EVERY KITE INTO THE AIR THAT CAN FLY.
THAT'LL MEAN TROUBLE FOR ANYONE WHO DOESN'T FIND THE TARGET. I'D BETTER WATCH MY NAVIGATION.

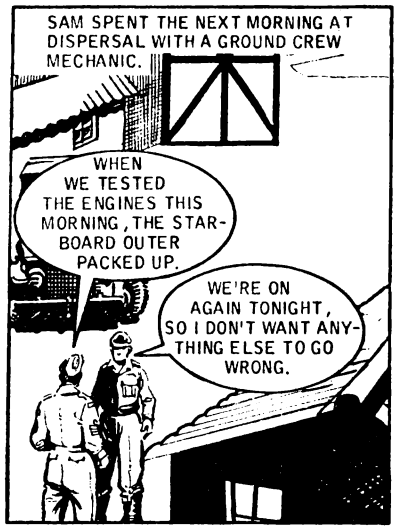
BECAUSE OF A PECULIARITY OF THE UNDERCARRIAGE DESIGN IT WAS EASY TO SHEAR THE SECURING BOLTS IF THE PILOT TURNED TOO SHARPLY – THIS RESULTED IN AN EXPENSIVE REPAIR JOB AND A FURIOUS SQUADRON COMMANDER.

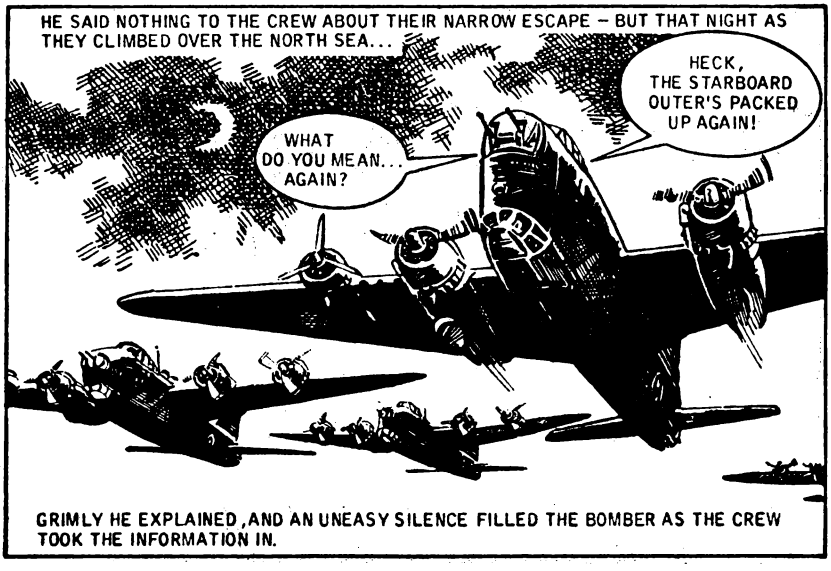


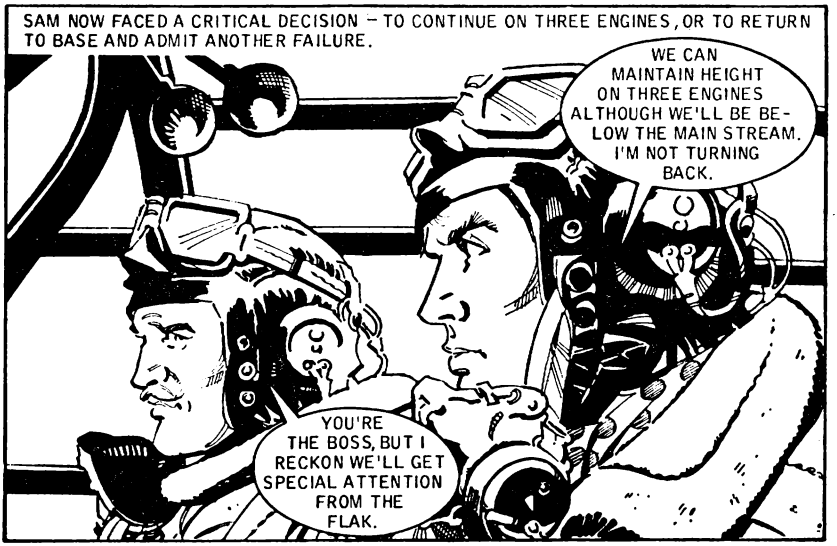

BUT AS THEY CLAMBERED INTO THEIR BOMBER AND STARTED THEIR ENGINES...
CHECK THE FLAPS AGAIN, MIKE. THEY DON'T SEEM TO BE WORKING.
THEY'RE NOT! MUST BE A FAULT SOMEWHERE BECAUSE THE UNDER-CARRIAGE CIRCUIT IS OUT OF ORDER, TOO.

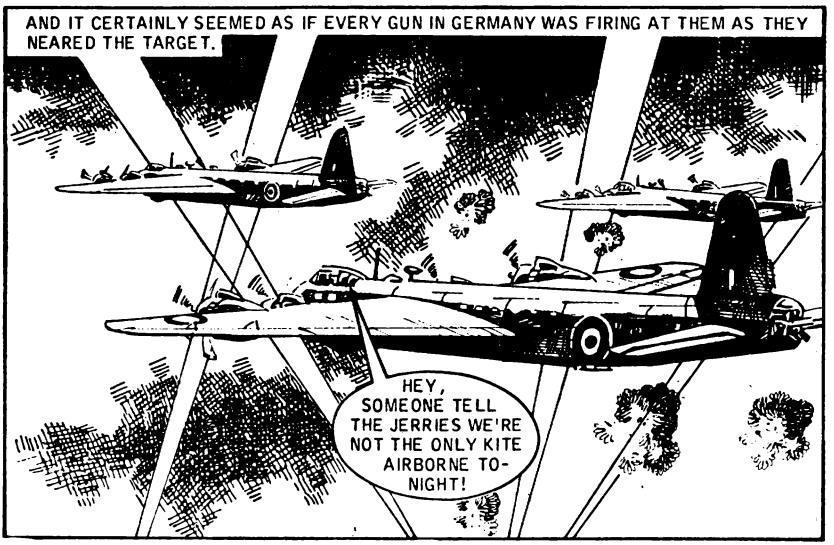

SAM SWITCHED OFF, KNOWING THAT IT WAS HOPELESS TO CONTINUE.
IT'S THESE ELECTRIC MOTORS. DAMP WEATHER AFFECTS THE INSULATION.
AND NOW WE'LL BE ON THE CARPET AS WELL. STILL, THE C.O. CAN'T REALLY SAY IT'S OUR FAULT.

REMEMBER WHAT I SAID, SKIPPER? UNLUCKY THIRTEEN! I RECKON WE SHOULD TRY AND GET ANOTHER KITE.
BELT UP, TODDY, YOU'RE ALWAYS COMPLAINING. IT COULD HAVE HAPPENED TO ANYONE.


SAM SPENT THE NEXT MORNING AT DISPERSAL WITH A GROUND CREW MECHANIC.
WHEN WE TESTED THE ENGINES THIS MORNING, THE STARBOARD OUTER PACKED UP.
WE'RE ON AGAIN TONIGHT, SO I DON'T WANT ANYTHING ELSE TO GO WRONG.


HE SAID NOTHING TO THE CREW ABOUT THEIR NARROW ESCAPE – BUT THAT NIGHT AS THEY CLIMBED OVER THE NORTH SEA...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN... AGAIN?
HECK, THE STARBOARD OUTER'S PACKED UP AGAIN!
GRIMLY HE EXPLAINED, AND AN UNEASY SILENCE FILLED THE BOMBER AS THE CREW TOOK THE INFORMATION IN.

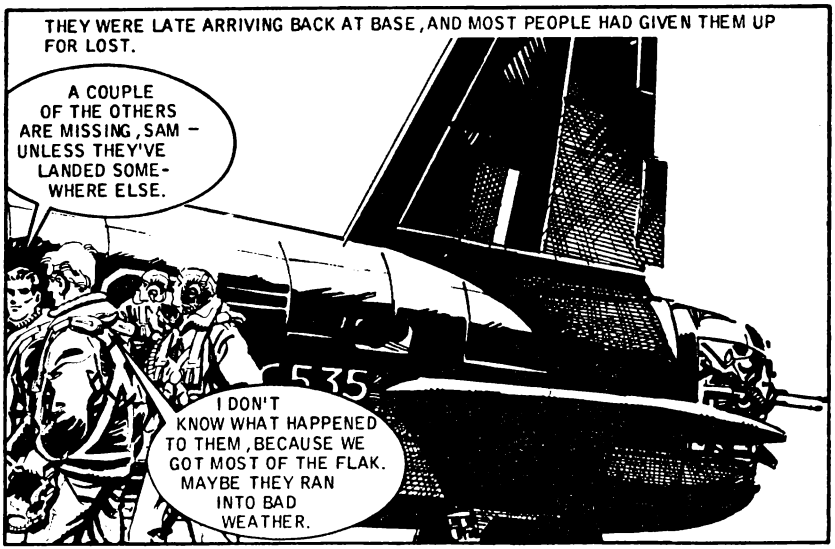

SAM NOW FACED A CRITICAL DECISION – TO CONTINUE ON THREE ENGINES, OR TO RETURN TO BASE AND ADMIT ANOTHER FAILURE.
WE CAN MAINTAIN HEIGHT ON THREE ENGINES ALTHOUGH WE'LL BE BELOW THE MAIN STREAM. I'M NOT TURNING BACK.
YOU'RE THE BOSS, BUT I RECKON WE'LL GET SPECIAL ATTENTION FROM THE FLAK.


AND IT CERTAINLY SEEMED AS IF EVERY GUN IN GERMANY WAS FIRING AT THEM AS THEY NEARED THE TARGET.
HEY, SOMEONE TELL THE JERRIES WE'RE NOT THE ONLY KITE AIRBORNE TONIGHT!

AND AS IT TURNED AWAY AFTER BOMBING, 535 WAS SHAKEN BY A TERRIFIC EXPLOSION –
WE'VE BEEN HIT! WE'RE ON FIRE!
YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME THAT!

AS FLAMES ROARED ALONG THE FUSELAGE, TODDY AND THE WIRELESS OPERATOR BATTLED DESPERATELY TO EXTINGUISH THEM.
HOW'S IT DOING? NEED ANY MORE HELP?
WE CAN MANAGE. JUST KEEP THE NOSE POINTING TOWARDS ENGLAND, AND GET CRACKING. THIS BOMBER MUST BE SATAN HIMSELF!

THEY GOT THE FIRE OUT EVENTUALLY, BUT TODDY REGARDED IT AS FURTHER PROOF OF 535's JINX.
ALL STIRLINGS ARE BAD, BUT THIS KITE HAS A HOODOO. SAM NEEDS HIS HEAD TESTING FOR LEAVING WHITLEYS.
WE CERTAINLY DON'T HAVE MUCH LUCK, BUT I SUPPOSE IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE.

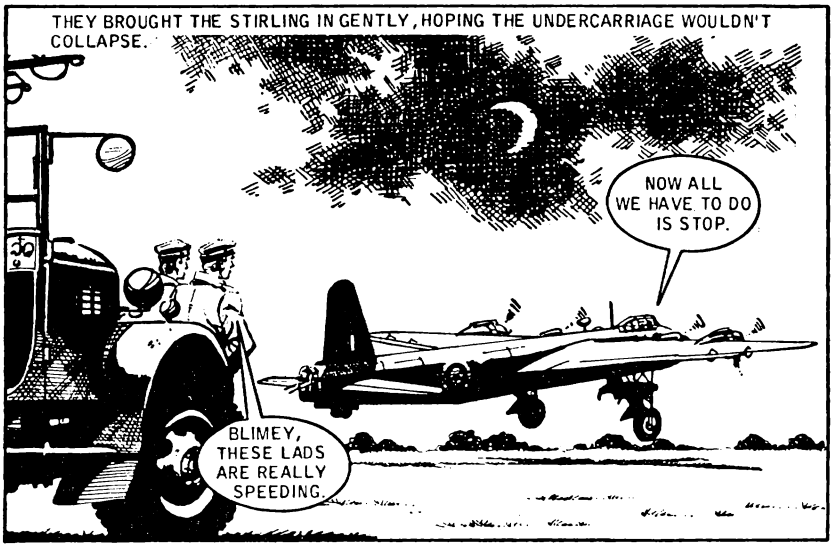

THEY WERE LATE ARRIVING BACK AT BASE, AND MOST PEOPLE HAD GIVEN THEM UP FOR LOST.
A COUPLE OF THE OTHERS ARE MISSING, SAM – UNLESS THEY'VE LANDED SOME-WHERE ELSE.
535
I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM, BECAUSE WE GOT MOST OF THE FLAK. MAYBE THEY RAN INTO BAD WEATHER.

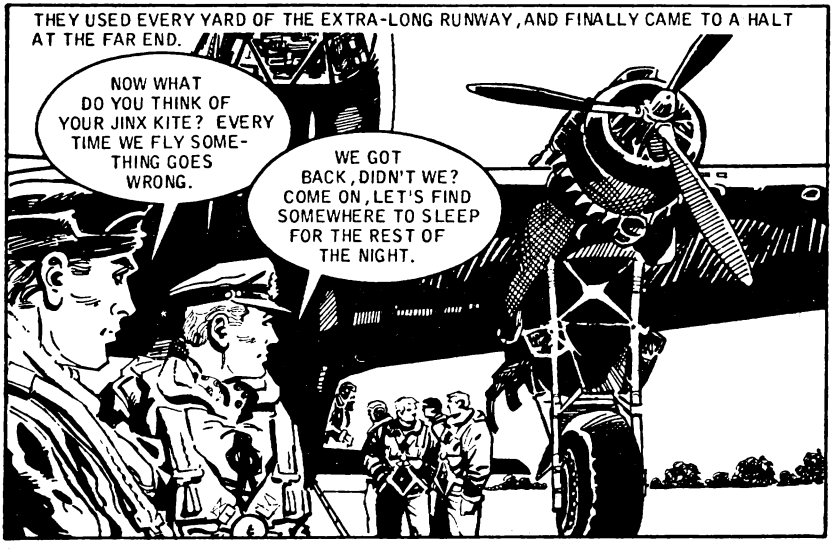
BUT IT HAD NOT BEEN BAD WEATHER THAT HAD ACCOUNTED FOR THE MISSING AIRCRAFT.
FIGHTERS, SWARMS OF THEM! THEY WERE NIBBLING AT US ALL THE WAY TO THE TARGET.
IT WAS THEIR NIGHT, ALL RIGHT. I SAW THREE WIMPEYS AND TWO STIRLINGS GO DOWN.
YOU HEARD THAT? IF WE'D BEEN WITH THE MAIN FORCE, WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN CHOPPED BY NIGHT FIGHTERS.
INSTEAD WE WERE NEARLY CHOPPED DOWN BY FLAK! SO WHAT DOES THAT PROVE?
TODDY REMAINED UNCONVINCED – BUT SOME OF THE OTHERS WONDERED IF 535 WASN'T LUCKY AFTER ALL.
THE REPAIRS ARE DONE, SO WE'LL BE ON OPS TONIGHT. STILL, I STILL RECKON SAM OUGHT TO GET ANOTHER KITE.
CHANGE THE KITE AND CHANGE OUR LUCK – BUT IT MIGHT CHANGE FOR THE WORSE! OUR KITE ISN'T REALLY THAT BAD, YOU KNOW.

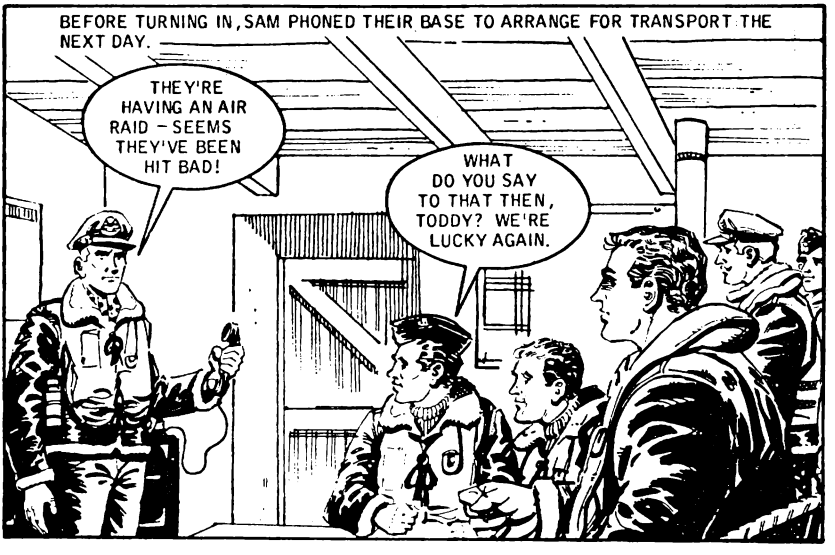
AND THAT NIGHT, AS IF TO CONFOUND TODDY, THEY HAD AN UNEVENTFUL RUN TO THE TARGET.
WE'LL GO HOME AT LOW LEVEL, WE MIGHT DODGE THE FLAK. KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN, PHIL!
IT WOULD JUST BE OUR LUCK TO CATCH SOME OF THAT FLAK!

THEN, AS THEY CROSSED THE DUTCH COAST ON THEIR WAY HOME, AND WERE ALMOST OUT OF RANGE...
THERE, WHAT DID I TELL YOU?
BLIMEY, WE'VE BEEN HIT!

SAM TRIED THE CONTROLS GRIMLY TO SEE WHAT DAMAGE HAD BEEN DONE.
WE'LL NEED AN AIRFIELD WITH A LONG RUNWAY, TODDY. WE HAVEN'T ANY BRAKES OR FLAPS WORKING.
THERE'S A NEW EMERGENCY STRIP NEAR MARR-BRIDGE, IN SUFFOLK. I'LL GIVE YOU A COURSE FOR IT.

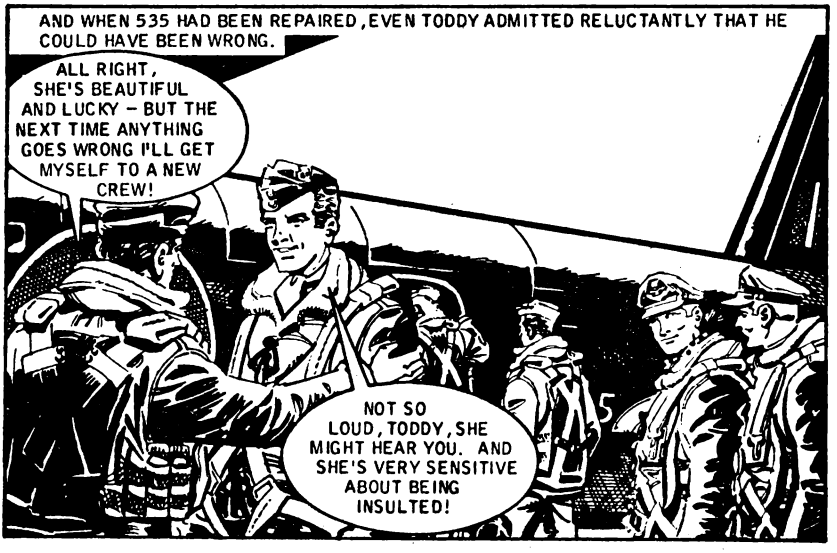

THEY BROUGHT THE STIRLING IN GENTLY, HOPING THE UNDERCARRIAGE WOULDN'T COLLAPSE.
NOW ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS STOP.
BLIMEY, THESE LADS ARE REALLY SPEEDING.

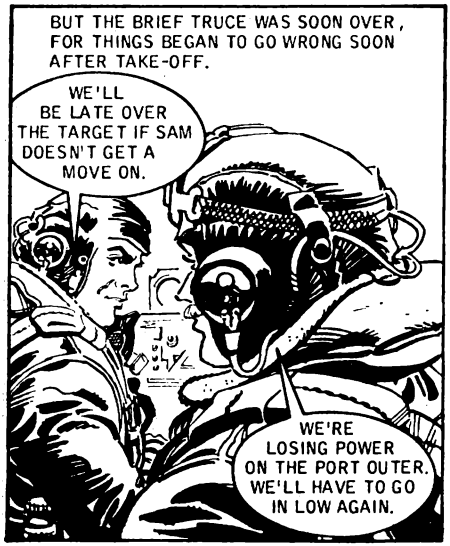

THEY USED EVERY YARD OF THE EXTRA-LONG RUNWAY, AND FINALLY CAME TO A HALT AT THE FAR END.
NOW WHAT DO YOU THINK OF YOUR JINX KITE? EVERY TIME WE FLY SOMETHING GOES WRONG.
WE GOT BACK, DIDN'T WE? COME ON, LET'S FIND SOMEWHERE TO SLEEP FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT.


BEFORE TURNING IN, SAM PHONED THEIR BASE TO ARRANGE FOR TRANSPORT THE NEXT DAY.
THEY'RE HAVING AN AIR RAID – SEEMS THEY'VE BEEN HIT BAD!
WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THAT THEN, TODDY? WE'RE LUCKY AGAIN.

WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THEIR OWN AIRFIELD THEY REALISED WHAT A NARROW ESCAPE THEY HAD HAD.

AND WHEN 535 HAD BEEN REPAIRED, EVEN TODDY ADMITTED RELUCTANTLY THAT HE COULD HAVE BEEN WRONG.




BUT THE BRIEF TRUCE WAS SOON OVER, FOR THINGS BEGAN TO GO WRONG SOON AFTER TAKE-OFF.
WE'LL BE LATE OVER THE TARGET IF SAM DOESN'T GET A MOVE ON.
WE'RE LOSING POWER ON THE PORT OUTER. WE'LL HAVE TO GO IN LOW AGAIN.

ONCE AGAIN THEY GOT MORE THAN THEIR FAIR SHARE OF FLAK AS THEY APPROACHED THE TARGET.
AT LEAST THIS SHOULD KEEP NIGHT-FIGHTERS AWAY. THEY WOULDN'T WANT TO FLY THROUGH THIS FLAK!

BUT AS THEY RELEASED THEIR BOMBS AND TURNED FOR HOME, THE FLAK STOPPED OMINOUSLY.
THAT MEANS FIGHTERS ANY MINUTE NOW.
YOU'RE RIGHT. PHIL, KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED!

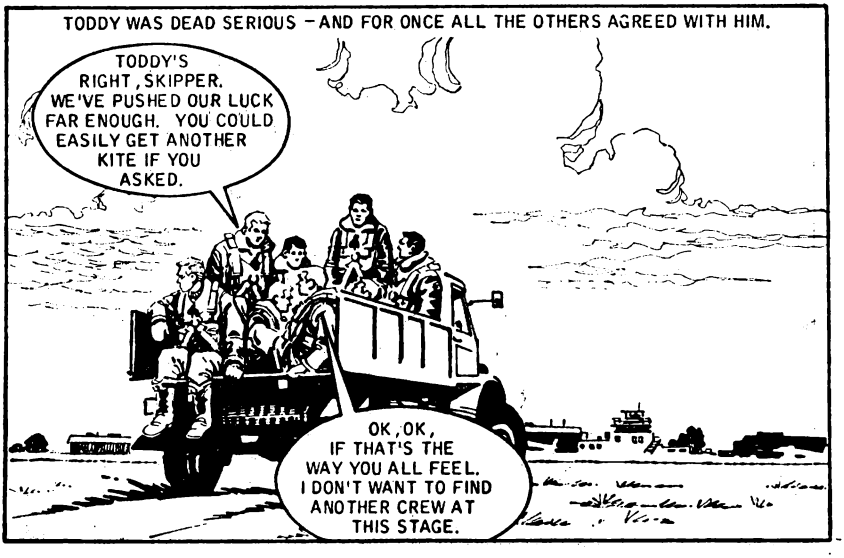
AS PREDICTED, THERE WERE KILLERS STALKING THROUGH THE DARKNESS. IN THIS CASE, AN Me 110 WAS LINING UP FOR THE KILL.
I CAN SEE THE ENGLANDER. I'LL WAIT UNTIL HE'S REALLY CLOSE BEFORE I FIRE.

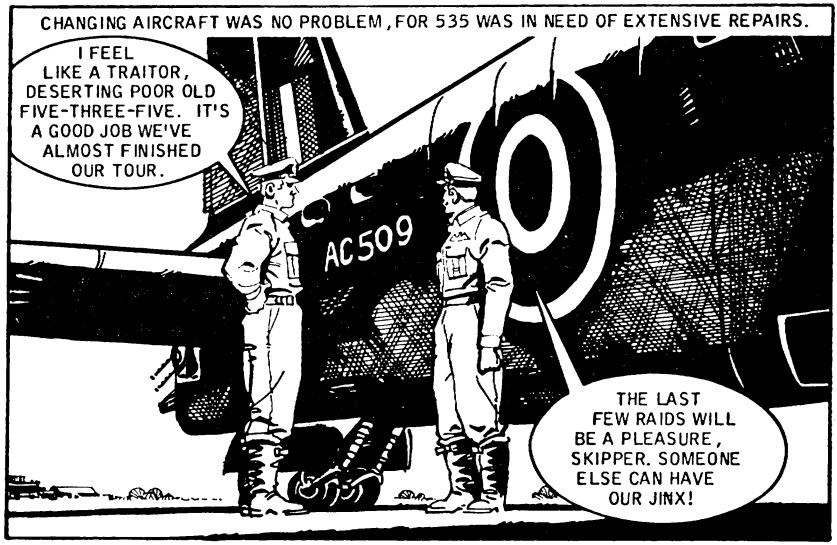
SUDDENLY PHIL YELLED AN URGENT WARNING. HIS KEEN EYES SPOTTED THE DANGER LONG BEFORE MANY OTHERS WOULD HAVE NOTICED ANYTHING.
CORKSCREW STARBOARD, SKIPPER - FIGHTERS!
HIMMEL, THEY'VE SEEN ME!

IT WAS A RACE FOR LIFE AS SAM DIVED FOR THE CLOUDS, A FURIOUS BARRAGE FROM PHIL HELPING TO KEEP THE NAZI AT BAY.
KEEP DODGING, SKIPPER, MY GUN-SIGHT'S DAMAGED AND I CAN'T AIM PROPERLY!
CANNON SHELLS SLASHED AT THEM, PUNCTURING THEIR AIRCRAFT VICIOUSLY AS THEY PLUNGED INTO THE WELCOME CLOUDS.
I THINK WE'VE LOST HIM. HE WAS STILL TURNING WHEN WE GOT INTO THE CLOUD.
IT WAS A NEAR THING, THOUGH. A BULLET NICKED MY ARM AND ANOTHER TORE THE SIDE OF MY HELMET!

PHIL HAD ALSO BEEN SLIGHTLY WOUNDED, BUT FORTUNATELY THERE WERE NO SERIOUS CASUALTIES.
DUTCH COAST ASTERN, THANK GOODNESS. IF THE ENGINES HOLD OUT WE'LL BE OK.
BY THE TIME THEY SIGHTED THEIR OWN FLARE-PATH SAM WAS WATCHING THE FUEL GAUGES ANXIOUSLY.
JUST ABOUT ENOUGH FUEL IF WE GO STRAIGHT IN WITHOUT CIRCLING. BETTER CROSS YOUR FINGERS ANYWAY!
AND AS THEY TOUCHED DOWN, TWO OF THE ENGINES CUT OUT FOR LACK OF FUEL.
THERE'S JUST ABOUT ENOUGH LEFT TO FILL YOUR LIGHTER!

AS THEY CLIMBED OUT AND STRETCHED WITH RELIEF, TODDY DELIVERED HIS ULTIMATUM.
I RECKON WE'VE HAD OUR LAST WARNING, SKIPPER. EITHER WE CHANGE KITES, OR I'M CHANGING CREWS.
YOU'RE NOT SERIOUS, TODDY? WE'VE BEEN TOGETHER SINCE THE WAR STARTED!


TODDY WAS DEAD SERIOUS – AND FOR ONCE ALL THE OTHERS AGREED WITH HIM.
TODDY'S RIGHT, SKIPPER. WE'VE PUSHED OUR LUCK FAR ENOUGH. YOU COULD EASILY GET ANOTHER KITE IF YOU ASKED.
OK, OK, IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU ALL FEEL. I DON'T WANT TO FIND ANOTHER CREW AT THIS STAGE.


CHANGING AIRCRAFT WAS NO PROBLEM, FOR 535 WAS IN NEED OF EXTENSIVE REPAIRS.
I FEEL LIKE A TRAITOR, DESERTING POOR OLD FIVE-THREE-FIVE. IT'S A GOOD JOB WE'VE ALMOST FINISHED OUR TOUR.
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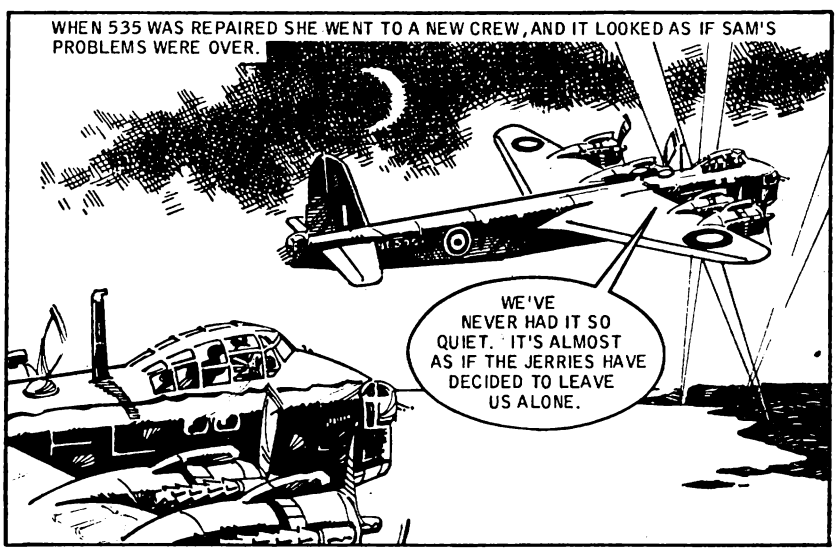
THE LAST FEW RAIDS WILL BE A PLEASURE, SKIPPER. SOMEONE ELSE CAN HAVE OUR JINX!


WHEN 535 WAS REPAIRED SHE WENT TO A NEW CREW, AND IT LOOKED AS IF SAM'S PROBLEMS WERE OVER.
WE'VE NEVER HAD IT SO QUIET. IT'S ALMOST AS IF THE JERRIES HAVE DECIDED TO LEAVE US ALONE.

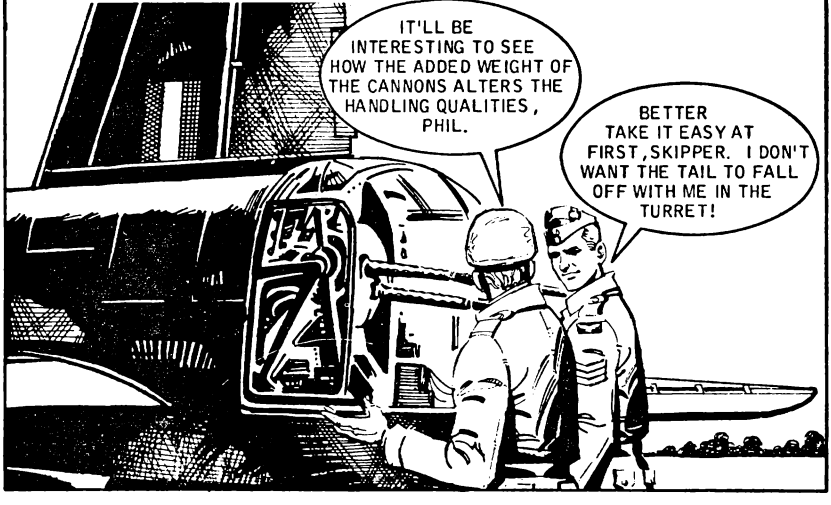
AND ON THE LAST RAID OF THEIR TOUR THEY WEREN'T EVEN FIRED AT.
WELL, SAM, THAT'S THE LOT! NOW FOR SOME LEAVE AND SIX MONTHS ON INSTRUCTION DUTIES.
YOU'VE GOT A HOPE. I'VE ALREADY BEEN IN TOUCH WITH BOB RAMSAY AT WINKLETON TO SEE IF HE HAS ANY JOBS GOING.
I THOUGHT YOU'D BE PLEASED. YOU'D BE BORED STIFF AS AN INSTRUCTOR.
TEST FLYING? WELL, IT'LL BE A CHANGE FROM STIRLINGS.
AS THEY LEFT TO BEGIN THEIR LEAVE THEY CAUGHT SIGHT OF AN OLD FRIEND.
LOOK, FIVE-THREE-FIVE WON'T START! NOW THEY KNOW WHAT WE HAD TO PUT UP WITH.
MAYBE SHE'S SORRY TO SEE US LEAVE. I STILL FEEL GUILTY ABOUT DESERTING HER.

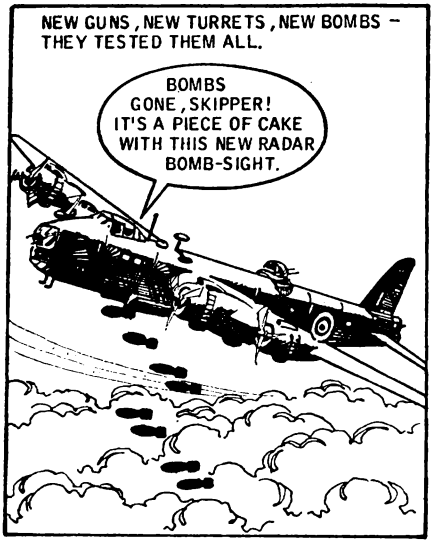
AFTER THEIR LEAVE SAM AND HIS CREW REPORTED TO WINKLETON, WHERE BOB RAMSAY WAS STILL WORKING FOR THE TEST AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT. FOR BOB HAD SUCCEEDED IN FINDING THEM A PLACE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT, IN A SECTION CONDUCTING TRIALS ON BOMBER COMMAND EQUIPMENT.

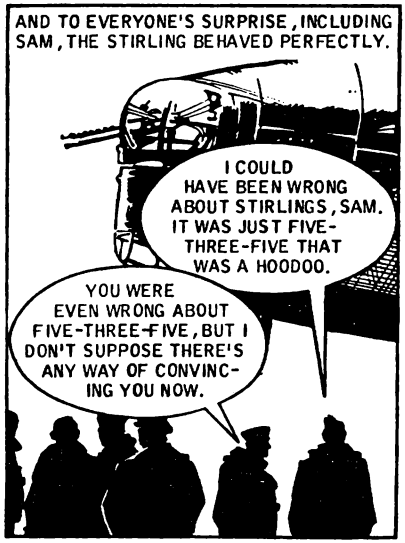
TODDY'S EYES GLEAMED AS HE SAW A HALIFAX – THEN HIS EXPRESSION ALTERED.

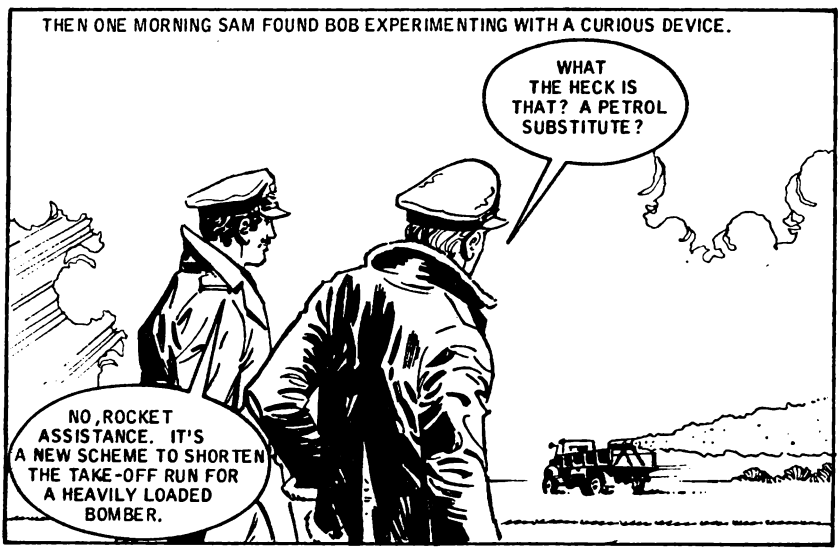
BOB CONFIRMED THAT THE STIRLING BELONGED TO THE UNIT – AND THAT WAS NOT ALL.

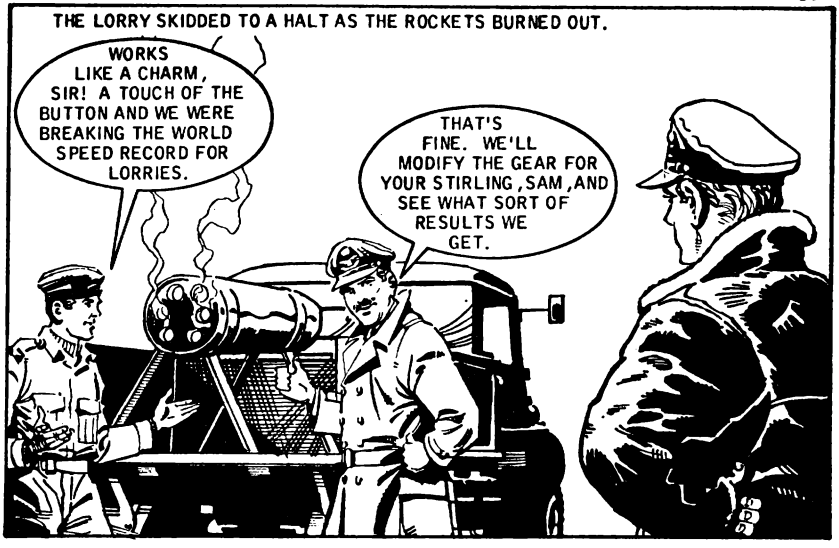
THEY WERE SOON HARD AT WORK, FOR THERE WAS PLENTY TO BE DONE. TWO 20mm CANNONS WERE TO BE FITTED IN THE TAIL TURRET.




NEW GUNS, NEW TURRETS, NEW BOMBS - THEY TESTED THEM ALL.
BOMBS GONE, SKIPPER! IT'S A PIECE OF CAKE WITH THIS NEW RADAR BOMB-SIGHT.


AND TO EVERYONE'S SURPRISE, INCLUDING SAM, THE STIRLING BEHAVED PERFECTLY.
I COULD HAVE BEEN WRONG ABOUT STIRLINGS, SAM. IT WAS JUST FIVE-THREE-FIVE THAT WAS A HOODOO.
YOU WERE EVEN WRONG ABOUT FIVE-THREE-FIVE, BUT I DON'T SUPPOSE THERE'S ANY WAY OF CONVINCING YOU NOW.

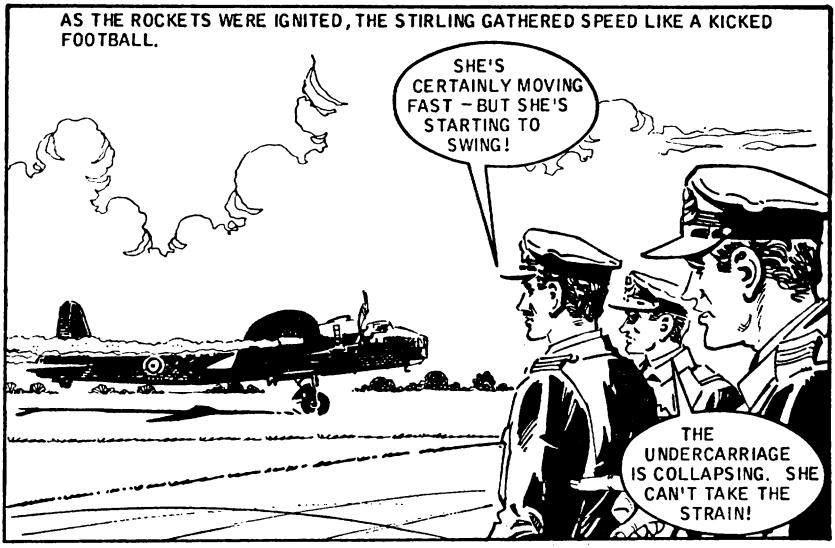

THEN ONE MORNING SAM FOUND BOB EXPERIMENTING WITH A CURIOUS DEVICE.
WHAT THE HECK IS THAT? A PETROL SUBSTITUTE?
NO, ROCKET ASSISTANCE. IT'S A NEW SCHEME TO SHORTEN THE TAKE-OFF RUN FOR A HEAVILY LOADED BOMBER.

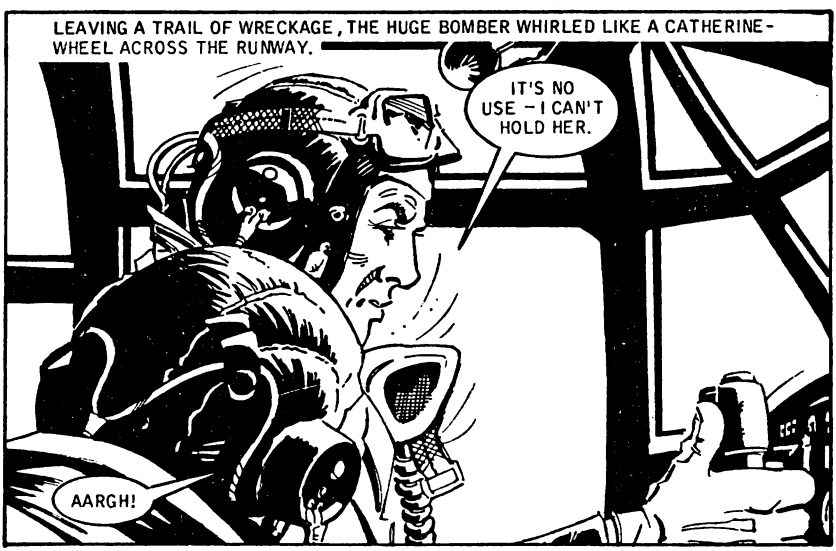

THE LORRY SKIDDED TO A HALT AS THE ROCKETS BURNED OUT.
WORKS LIKE A CHARM, SIR! A TOUCH OF THE BUTTON AND WE WERE BREAKING THE WORLD SPEED RECORD FOR LORRIES.
THAT'S FINE. WE'LL MODIFY THE GEAR FOR YOUR STIRLING, SAM, AND SEE WHAT SORT OF RESULTS WE GET.

BUT THE FULLY-LOADED STIRLING WAS NOT SO EASY TO PUSH AS A SMALL LORRY.
IT NEEDS MORE THRUST, SIR. I'LL HAVE THE NEW PACKS FITTED – THEY'RE MUCH MORE POWERFUL THAN THE ORIGINAL MODELS.

BUT SAM AND HIS CREW WATCHED DUBIOUSLY AS THE NEW EQUIPMENT WAS FITTED.
WHY DON'T WE TRY IT IN STAGES, BOB? WE DON'T WANT TOO MUCH POWER TO START WITH.
THERE'S NO TIME, SAM, WE'RE BEING PUSHED BY THE BOFFINS. THE AIR MINISTRY WANTS RESULTS - FAST!

AND SO, A LITTLE LATER, SAM CHECKED THAT ALL WAS WELL BEFORE REACHING FOR THE FIRING BUTTONS.
RIGHT, LET'S GO. AS SOON AS WE'RE ROLLING STRAIGHT, I'LL FIRE THE CHARGES.
I'M GLAD WE'RE LOADED WITH SAND-BAGS AND NOT BOMBS. I DON'T TRUST THESE NEW-FANGLED GADGETS.


AS THE ROCKETS WERE IGNITED, THE STIRLING GATHERED SPEED LIKE A KICKED FOOTBALL.
SHE'S CERTAINLY MOVING FAST – BUT SHE'S STARTING TO SWING!
THE UNDERCARRIAGE IS COLLAPSING. SHE CAN'T TAKE THE STRAIN!


LEAVING A TRAIL OF WRECKAGE, THE HUGE BOMBER WHIRLED LIKE A CATHERINE-WHEEL ACROSS THE RUNWAY.
IT'S NO USE – I CAN'T HOLD HER.
AARGH!

SHEDDING HALF A WING, THE AIRCRAFT HURTLED ON UNTIL IT LANDED IN A DITCH.

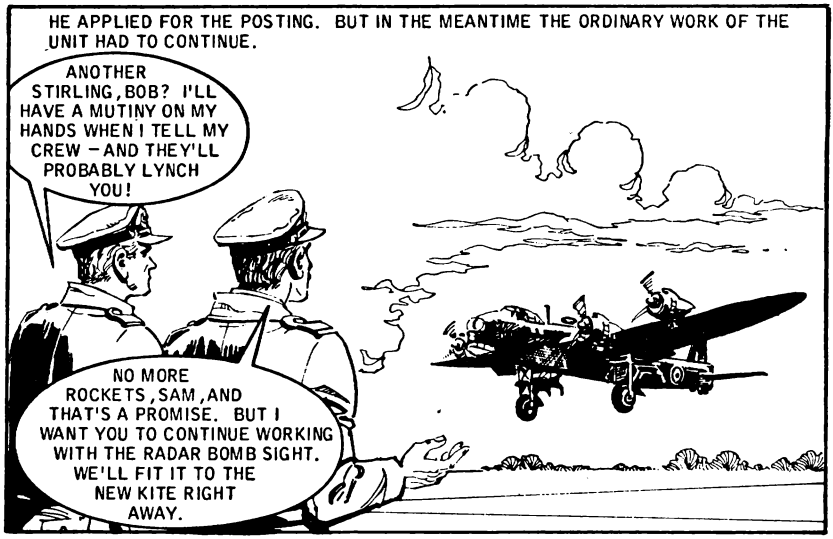
NOW I KNOW WHAT A SHELL FEELS LIKE WHEN IT'S BEEN FIRED!

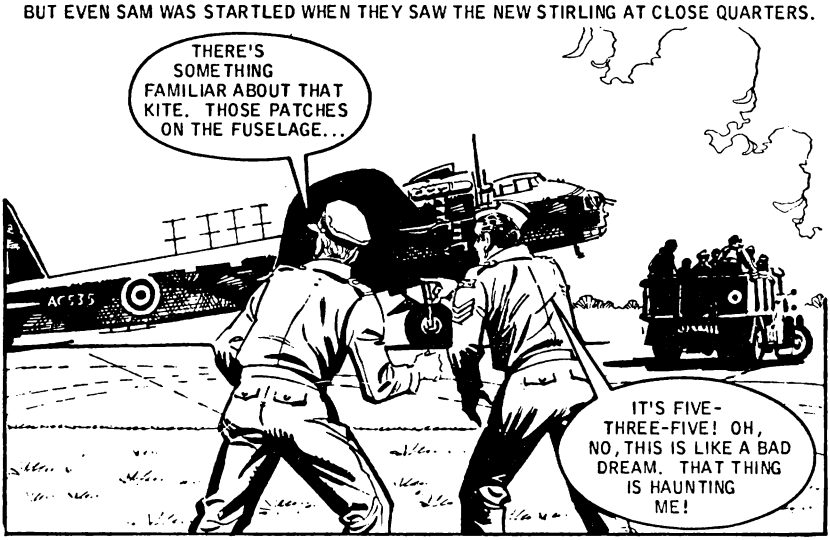
TALK ABOUT SUICIDE KITES!

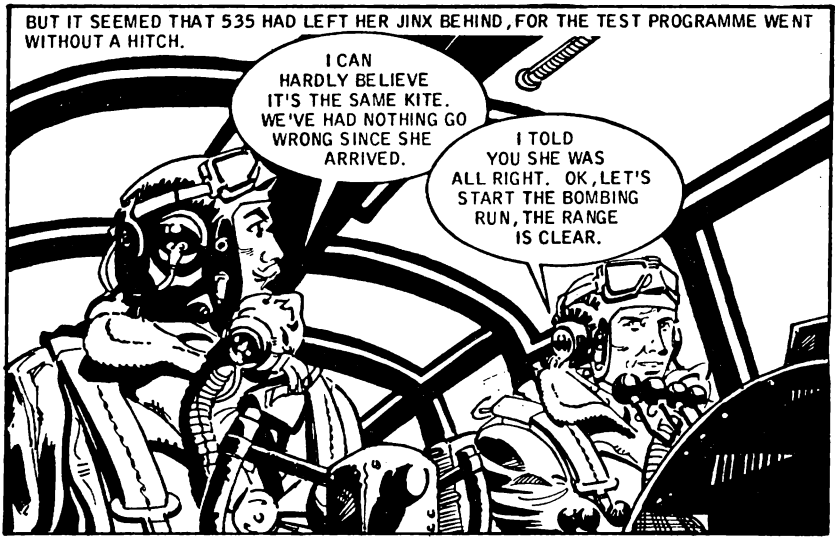
BY SOME MIRACLE THE ONLY INJURIES WERE CUTS AND BRUISES, BUT SAM HAD TO SOOTHE HIS RUFFLED CREW.

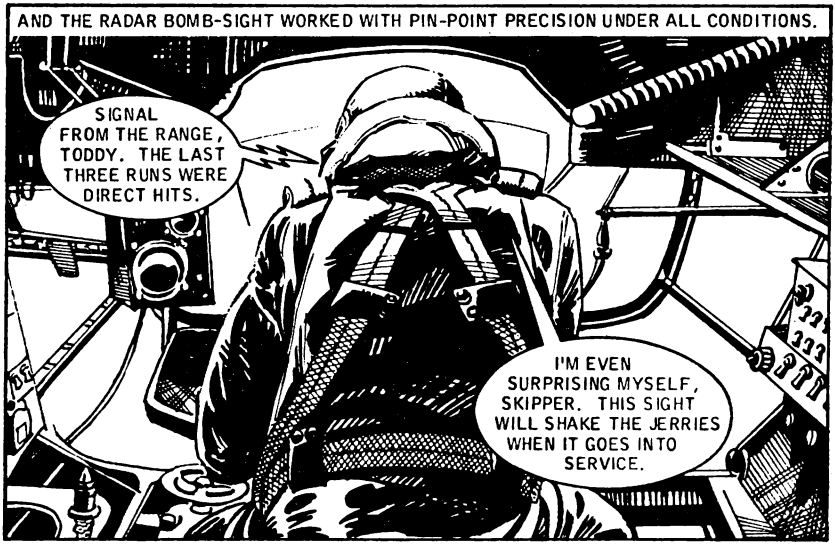
I PROMISE YOU, FELLERS, I'LL APPLY RIGHT AWAY FOR AN OPERATIONAL POSTING ON HALIFAXES. NO MORE STIRLINGS.

THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID WHEN WE LEFT THE SQUADRON – AND LOOK WHAT HAPPENED!


HE APPLIED FOR THE POSTING. BUT IN THE MEANTIME THE ORDINARY WORK OF THE UNIT HAD TO CONTINUE.
ANOTHER STIRLING, BOB? I'LL HAVE A MUTINY ON MY HANDS WHEN I TELL MY CREW – AND THEY'LL PROBABLY LYNCH YOU!
NO MORE ROCKETS, SAM, AND THAT'S A PROMISE. BUT I WANT YOU TO CONTINUE WORKING WITH THE RADAR BOMB SIGHT. WE'LL FIT IT TO THE NEW KITE RIGHT AWAY.


BUT EVEN SAM WAS STARTLED WHEN THEY SAW THE NEW STIRLING AT CLOSE QUARTERS.
THERE'S SOMETHING FAMILIAR ABOUT THAT KITE. THOSE PATCHES ON THE FUSELAGE...
IT'S FIVE-THREE-FIVE! OH, NO, THIS IS LIKE A BAD DREAM. THAT THING IS HAUNTING ME!


BUT IT SEEMED THAT 535 HAD LEFT HER JINX BEHIND, FOR THE TEST PROGRAMME WENT WITHOUT A HITCH.
I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT'S THE SAME KITE. WE'VE HAD NOTHING GO WRONG SINCE SHE ARRIVED.
I TOLD YOU SHE WAS ALL RIGHT. OK, LET'S START THE BOMBING RUN, THE RANGE IS CLEAR.


AND THE RADAR BOMB-SIGHT WORKED WITH PIN-POINT PRECISION UNDER ALL CONDITIONS.
SIGNAL FROM THE RANGE, TODDY. THE LAST THREE RUNS WERE DIRECT HITS.
I'M EVEN SURPRISING MYSELF, SKIPPER. THIS SIGHT WILL SHAKE THE JERRIES WHEN IT GOES INTO SERVICE.

AND AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS OF INTENSIVE TESTING, THE NEW SIGHT WAS CLEARED FOR SQUADRON USE.

THAT'LL PLEASE THE LADS. THEY WERE BEGINNING TO THINK WE'D BE HERE FOR THE REST OF THE WAR!

A HALIFAX SQUADRON IS BEING FORMED FOR SPECIAL DUTIES, AND THEY'LL GET THE FIRST DELIVERIES. THE A.O.C. HAS AGREED TO LET YOU JOIN THEM.

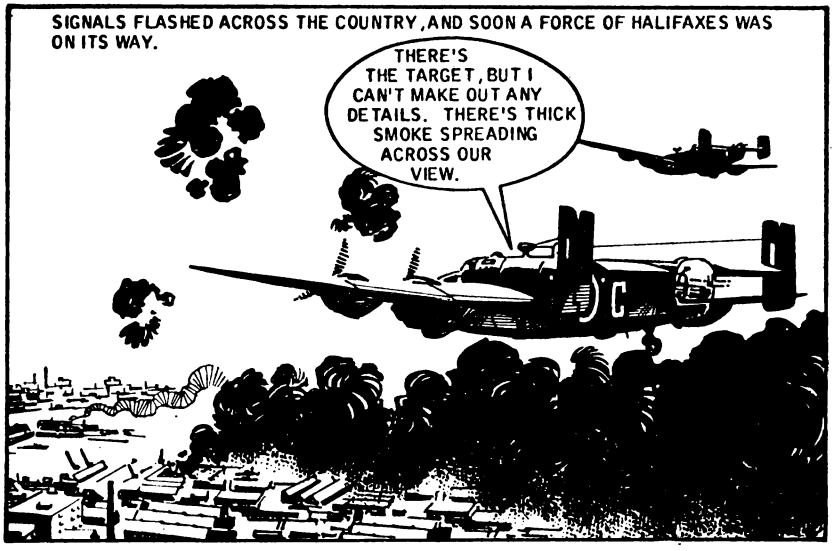
MEANWHILE, FAR AWAY ACROSS EUROPE, A PHOTO-RECCE SPITFIRE WAS CIRCLING HIGH ABOVE A PORT IN SOUTHERN ITALY WITH ITS CAMERAS RECORDING EVERYTHING OF INTEREST.

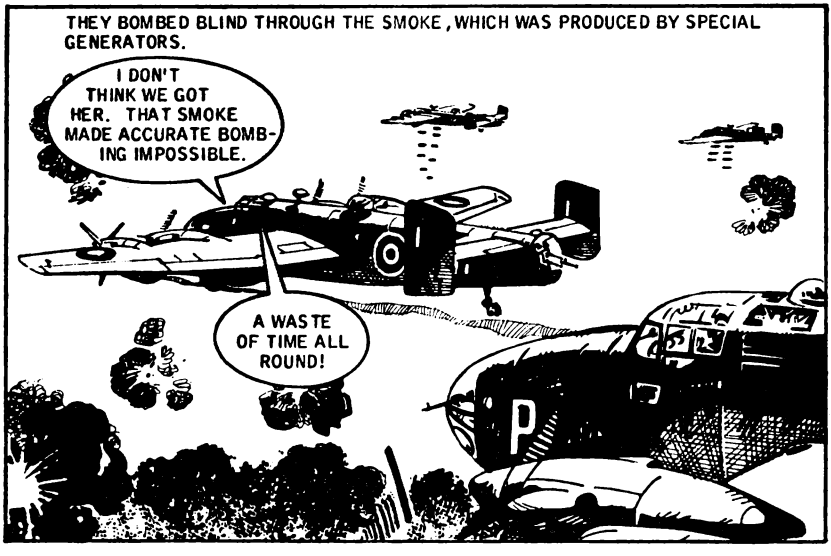
I'D BETTER MAKE ONE MORE RUN – THERE'S SOME INTERESTING SHIPPING DOWN THERE...

THE PHOTOGRAPHS CAUSED GREAT EXCITEMENT AT THE WAR OFFICE.

IT'S THE ADMIRAL EISEN – A JERRY POCKET-BATTLESHIP! SHE MUST HAVE SLIPPED IN FOR REPAIRS.

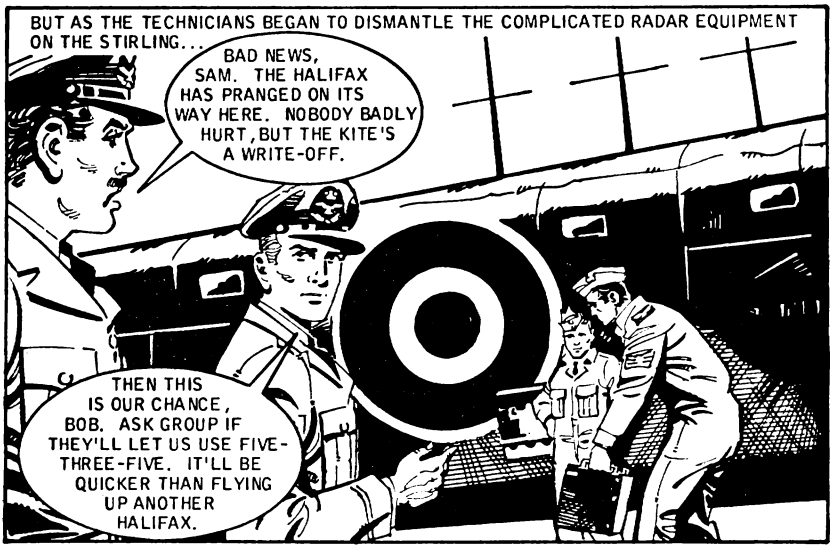
OUR CRUISERS HIT HER DURING THAT SCRAP LAST WEEK. WE MUST FINISH HER OFF BEFORE SHE CAN GET AWAY AGAIN.

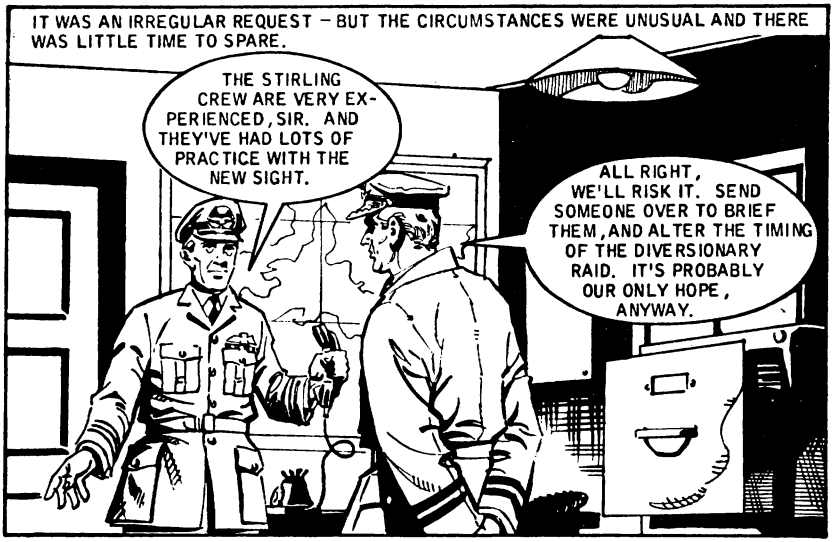

SIGNALS FLASHED ACROSS THE COUNTRY, AND SOON A FORCE OF HALIFAXES WAS ON ITS WAY.
THERE'S THE TARGET, BUT I CAN'T MAKE OUT ANY DETAILS. THERE'S THICK SMOKE SPREADING ACROSS OUR VIEW.


THEY BOMBED BLIND THROUGH THE SMOKE, WHICH WAS PRODUCED BY SPECIAL GENERATORS.
I DON'T THINK WE GOT HER. THAT SMOKE MADE ACCURATE BOMBING IMPOSSIBLE.
A WASTE OF TIME ALL ROUND!

AT DAWN ANOTHER PHOTO-RECCE FLIGHT CONFIRMED THAT THE ADMIRAL EISEN WAS STILL AT HER MOORINGS.
THE NEAREST BOMB WAS HALF A MILE AWAY! AND ANY DAY NOW SHE MIGHT SAIL, AND WE'LL LOSE HER.
THIS IS A JOB FOR RADAR BOMBING. HOW IS THAT HALIFAX SQUADRON COMING ALONG? ARE THEY TRAINED YET?
THERE'S BEEN A PRODUCTION HOLD-UP, SIR. THE CREWS HAVE LEARNED THE THEORY, BUT THE SIGHTS HAVEN'T BEEN FITTED TO THEIR AIRCRAFT YET. ALTHOUGH THERE IS ONE AT WINKLETON.
THAT'LL DO. SEND YOUR BEST CREW TO COLLECT THE SIGHT. THEY CAN OPERATE FROM THERE, IT HAS ALL THE FACILITIES.

SAM HEARD THE NEWS GLUMLY, FOR HE WOULD HAVE LIKED TO TRY THE NEW SIGHT IN ACTION.
IT'S SOME SORT OF SPECIAL TARGET, AND AS THE HALIFAXES ARRIVE WE'RE TO FIT THE SIGHT AND LOAD THEM UP WITH BOMBS. MUST BE PRETTY IMPORTANT.
IT'S A PITY WE WEREN'T FLYING A HALIFAX – THEY MIGHT HAVE LET US FLY THE OP OURSELVES. NOW SOMEONE ELSE GETS ALL THE FUN!


BUT AS THE TECHNICIANS BEGAN TO DISMANTLE THE COMPLICATED RADAR EQUIPMENT ON THE STIRLING...
BAD NEWS, SAM. THE HALIFAX HAS PRANGED ON ITS WAY HERE. NOBODY BADLY HURT, BUT THE KITE'S A WRITE-OFF.
THEN THIS IS OUR CHANCE, BOB. ASK GROUP IF THEY'LL LET US USE FIVE-THREE-FIVE. IT'LL BE QUICKER THAN FLYING UP ANOTHER HALIFAX.


IT WAS AN IRREGULAR REQUEST – BUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES WERE UNUSUAL AND THERE WAS LITTLE TIME TO SPARE.
THE STIRLING CREW ARE VERY EXPERIENCED, SIR. AND THEY'VE HAD LOTS OF PRACTICE WITH THE NEW SIGHT.
ALL RIGHT, WE'LL RISK IT. SEND SOMEONE OVER TO BRIEF THEM, AND ALTER THE TIMING OF THE DIVERSIONARY RAID. IT'S PROBABLY OUR ONLY HOPE, ANYWAY.

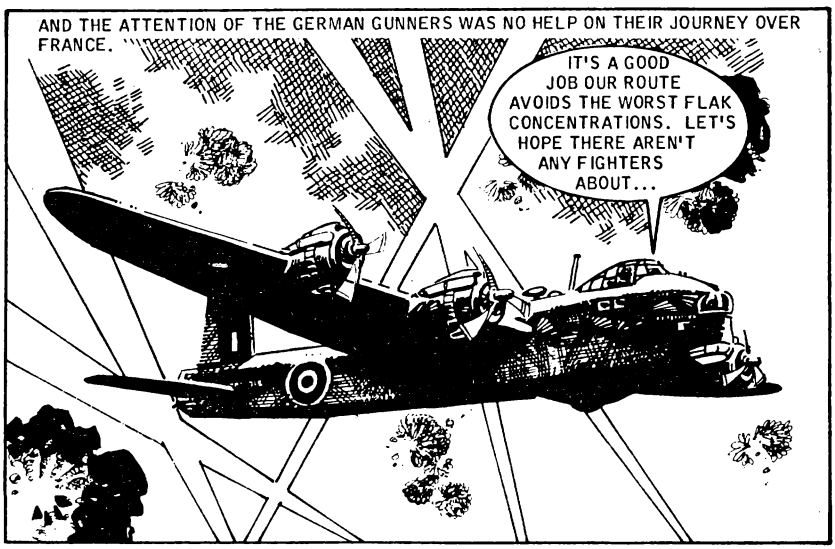
AND SO SAM AND HIS CREW FACED THE PROSPECT OF FLYING 535 ON OPERATIONS ONCE AGAIN.
I DON'T KNOW THE TARGET YET, BUT BRIEFING'S IN TEN MINUTES. AND IT'S VOLUNTEERS ONLY!
TAKING OUR JINX KITE ON A SUICIDE RAID? NOW I KNOW I SHOULD HAVE JOINED THE NAVY!

BUT THEIR SPIRITS ROSE WHEN THEY HEARD WHAT THEIR MISSION WAS.
THERE'LL BE A DIVERSIONARY RAID LAID ON TO DRAW THE FLAK AND FIGHTERS AWAY FROM YOU, BUT THE REST IS UP TO YOU. YOU WON'T HAVE ENOUGH FUEL TO MAKE THE RETURN JOURNEY SO YOU'LL HAVE TO CONTINUE ON TO EGYPT.
YOU HEAR THAT, SAM? A POCKET BATTLESHIP – AND SHE'S ALL OURS! WHOOPEE!

FORTUNATELY WINKLETON WAS ABLE TO SUPPLY ALL 535's OPERATIONAL NEEDS.
PITY WE DIDN'T KEEP THOSE BIG CANNONS, SKIPPER. IT LOOKS AS IF WE MIGHT NEED THEM.
WE CAN'T AFFORD THE EXTRA WEIGHT, PHIL. DON'T FORGET WE'VE GOT TO CROSS THE ALPS.

AND AS NIGHT FELL, THEY LUMBERED OFF THE RUNWAY AND CLIMBED SLOWLY OVER THE SEA.
LOOK OUT, MUSSOLINI, HERE WE COME!

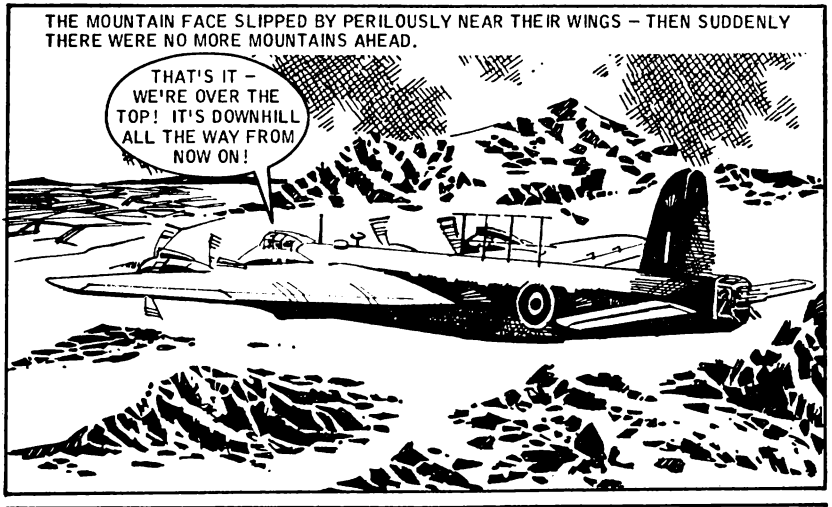
BURDENED BY HER HEAVY LOAD OF FUEL AND BOMBS, 535 WAS RELUCTANT TO CLIMB.
AT THIS RATE WE'LL GO THROUGH THE ALPS INSTEAD OF OVER THEM.
WE'LL HAVE USED A LOT OF FUEL BEFORE WE REACH THEM, SO THAT'LL HELP.

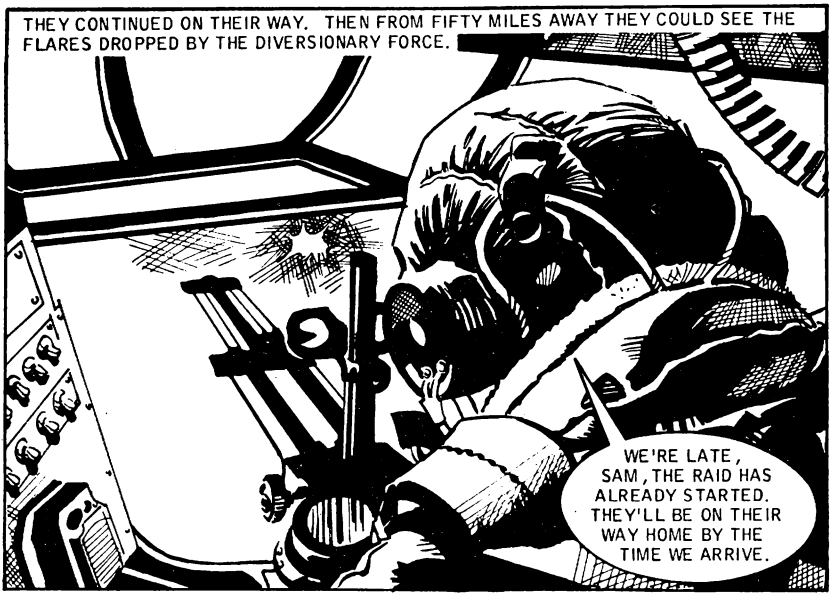

AND THE ATTENTION OF THE GERMAN GUNNERS WAS NO HELP ON THEIR JOURNEY OVER FRANCE.
IT'S A GOOD JOB OUR ROUTE AVOIDS THE WORST FLAK CONCENTRATIONS. LET'S HOPE THERE AREN'T ANY FIGHTERS ABOUT...

ALL TOO SOON, IT SEEMED, THEY SIGHTED THE DISTANT ICY PEAKS OF THE ALPS.
WE'VE GOT TO GAIN MORE HEIGHT, SAM! OTHERWISE WE'LL NEVER GET OVER THE MOUNTAINS.
NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT, TODDY, EXCEPT WAIT. I DON'T LIKE THE SITUATION ANY MORE THAN YOU DO.

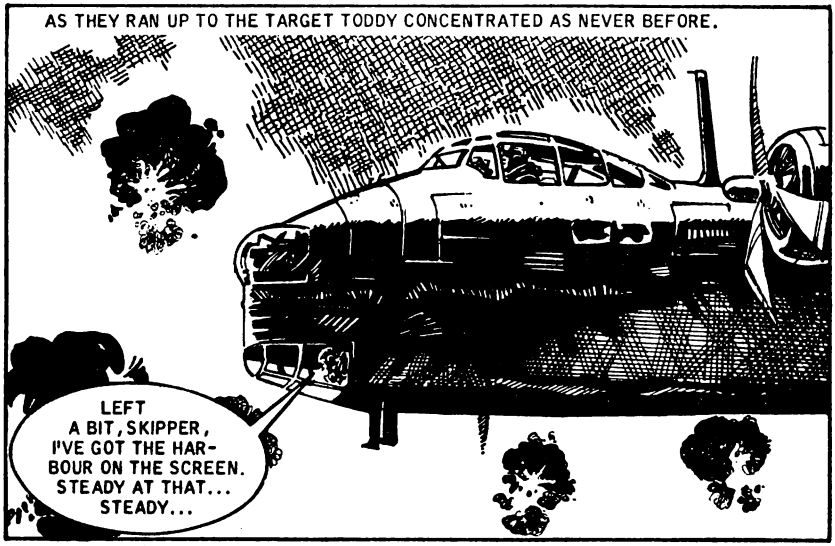
AS THEIR FUEL BURNED AWAY THEY GAINED A VITAL FEW HUNDRED FEET – BUT IT WAS A SLOW PROCESS.
HEY, SKIPPER, IF YOU GO MUCH LOWER I'LL NEED A PAIR OF SKIS!

AND ONLY SAM'S SKILL GOT THEM THROUGH THE NARROW PASSES.
WE'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE THIS ONE, SKIPPER! THAT CRAG'S RIGHT ON OUR TRACK.
WE'VE GOT TO, MIKE. WE'VE GOT TO!


THE MOUNTAIN FACE SLIPPED BY PERILOUSLY NEAR THEIR WINGS – THEN SUDDENLY THERE WERE NO MORE MOUNTAINS AHEAD.
THAT'S IT – WE'RE OVER THE TOP! IT'S DOWNHILL ALL THE WAY FROM NOW ON!


THEY CONTINUED ON THEIR WAY. THEN FROM FIFTY MILES AWAY THEY COULD SEE THE FLARES DROPPED BY THE DIVERSIONARY FORCE.
WE'RE LATE, SAM, THE RAID HAS ALREADY STARTED. THEY'LL BE ON THEIR WAY HOME BY THE TIME WE ARRIVE.

THE FLAK REACHED OUT FOR THEM AS THEY NEARED THE TARGET, FOR THE REST OF THE BOMBERS HAD DEPARTED.
TODDY SAYS WE'VE BEEN HIT, SKIPPER. THE HEATING SYSTEM'S PUNCTURED.
WE'LL BE WARM ENOUGH WITHOUT IT. I'VE NEVER SEEN FLAK THIS THICK – EVEN OVER GERMANY!


AS THEY RAN UP TO THE TARGET TODDY CONCENTRATED AS NEVER BEFORE.
LEFT A BIT, SKIPPER, I'VE GOT THE HARBOUR ON THE SCREEN. STEADY AT THAT... STEADY...

NOTHING WAS VISIBLE BELOW, EXCEPT FLAK SPARKLING THROUGH THE DENSE SMOKE-SCREEN.

I JUST HOPE TODDY CAN. I WOULDN'T WANT TO DO THIS TRIP TWICE.

LUCKY WE'RE USING RADAR, SKIPPER. I CAN'T SEE A THING DOWN THERE.

THEN, AS THE NARROW OUTLINE OF THE ADMIRAL EISEN SLID ACROSS THE RADAR SCREEN...

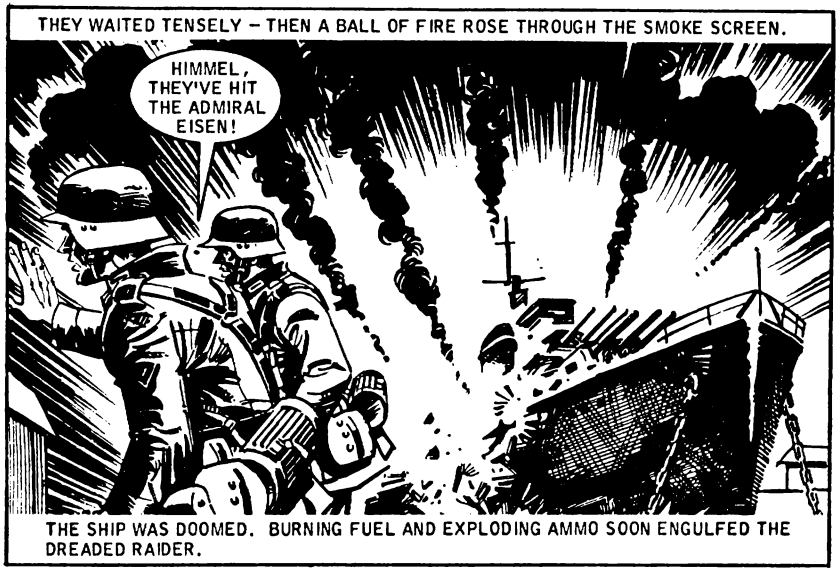
WE'VE BEEN HIT!

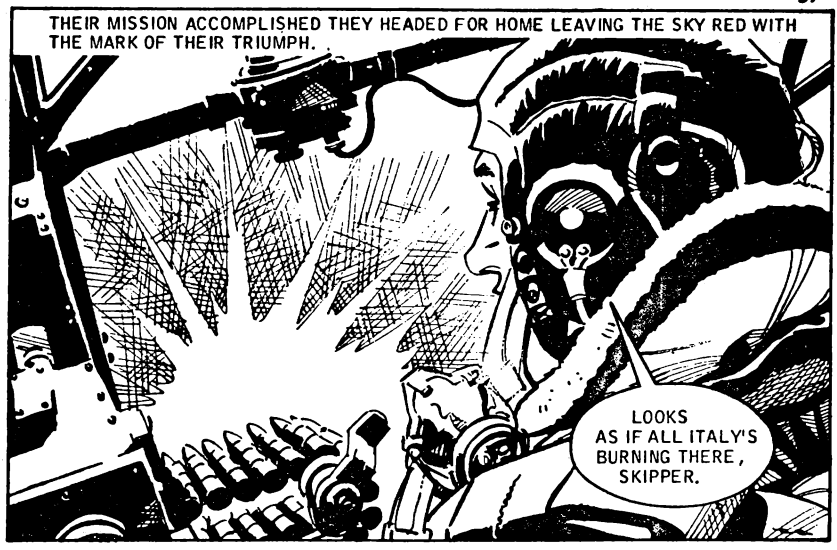
ALTHOUGH THE FLAK CAUSED RELATIVELY MINOR DAMAGE TO THE PLANE, DAVE WAS BADLY INJURED BY STRAY SHRAPNEL.

SAM BANKED GRIMLY AND BEGAN A SECOND APPROACH UNDER TODDY'S DIRECTIONS.

I'VE HAD TO FEATHER THE PORT OUTER. WE CAN'T MAINTAIN HEIGHT MUCH LONGER.

ON THE SECOND RUN TODDY PRESSED THE RELEASE BUTTON AND THE BOMBS TUMBLED AWAY.
LET'S HOPE IT'S NOT ALL BEEN IN VAIN.
BOMBS GONE, SKIPPER!

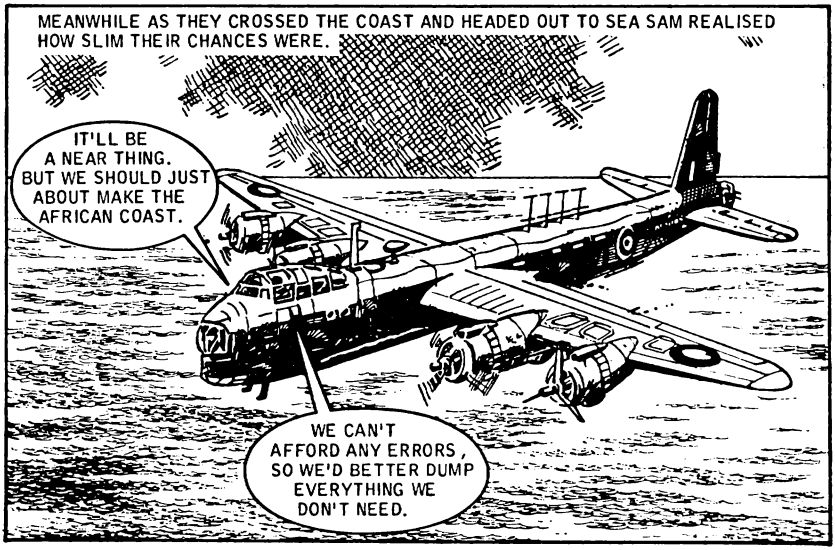

THEY WAITED TENSELY – THEN A BALL OF FIRE ROSE THROUGH THE SMOKE SCREEN.
HIMMEL, THEY'VE HIT THE ADMIRAL EISEN!
THE SHIP WAS DOOMED. BURNING FUEL AND EXPLODING AMMO SOON ENGULFED THE DREADED RAIDER.

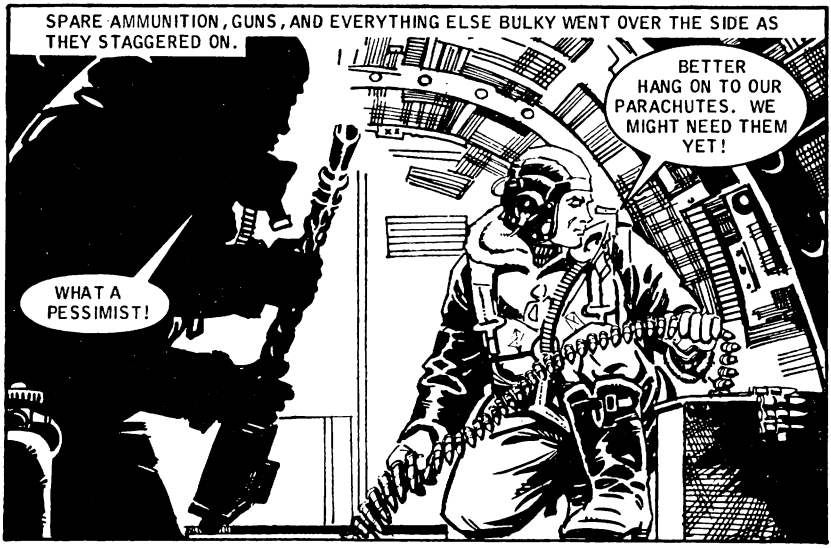

THEIR MISSION ACCOMPLISHED THEY HEADED FOR HOME LEAVING THE SKY RED WITH THE MARK OF THEIR TRIUMPH.
LOOKS AS IF ALL ITALY'S BURNING THERE, SKIPPER.

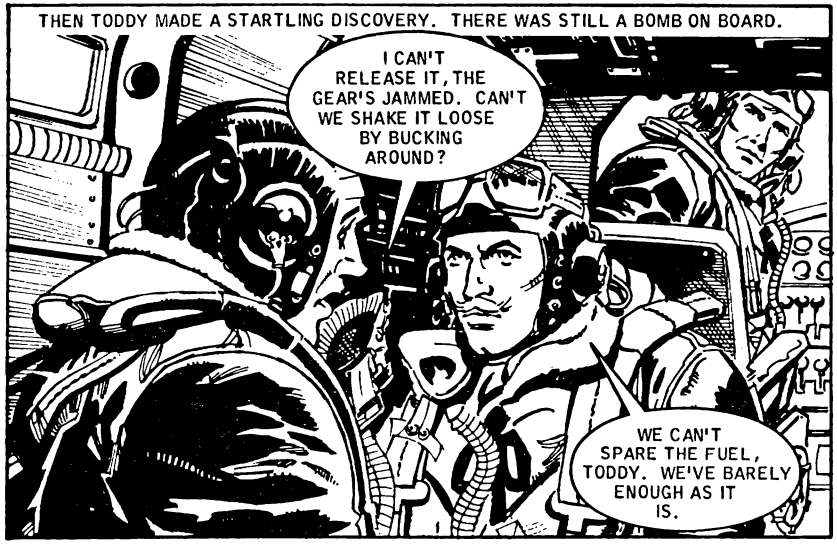
ALTHOUGH THEIR PRIMARY AIM WAS ACCOMPLISHED, THEY STILL HAD TO MAKE IT ON TO EGYPT, HAMPERED BY A DAMAGED ENGINE.
HAVE WE ENOUGH POWER TO REACH EGYPT, SKIPPER?
I DON'T KNOW, TODDY. DON'T FANCY COMING DOWN IN THE MED.

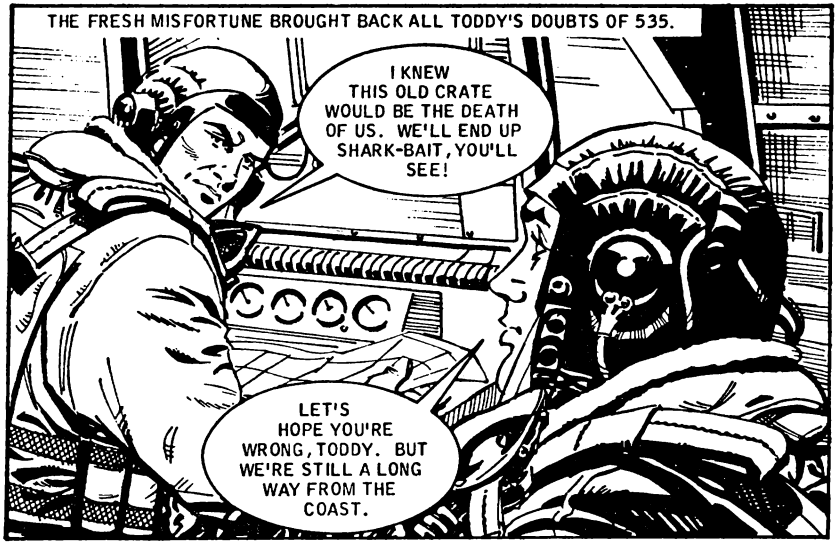
IN THE EXCITEMENT OF THE EVENTS SAM HAD FORGOTTEN THAT ONE OF HIS GUNNERS HAD BEEN INJURED.
HOLD HER ON THIS COURSE, MIKE, I'LL GO BACK AND SEE HOW DAVE IS.

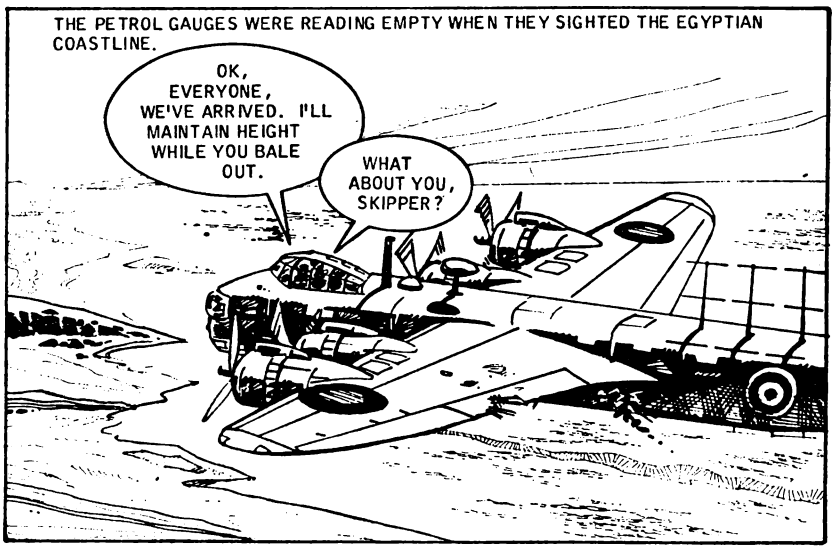
ALTHOUGH HIS LEG HAD BEEN BADLY INJURED, DAVE'S SPIRITS WERE HIGH.
I'LL BE OK, SKIPPER, I'VE COME THROUGH TOUGHER SCRAPES THAN THIS ONE.


MEANWHILE AS THEY CROSSED THE COAST AND HEADED OUT TO SEA SAM REALISED HOW SLIM THEIR CHANCES WERE.
IT'LL BE A NEAR THING. BUT WE SHOULD JUST ABOUT MAKE THE AFRICAN COAST.
WE CAN'T AFFORD ANY ERRORS, SO WE'D BETTER DUMP EVERYTHING WE DON'T NEED.

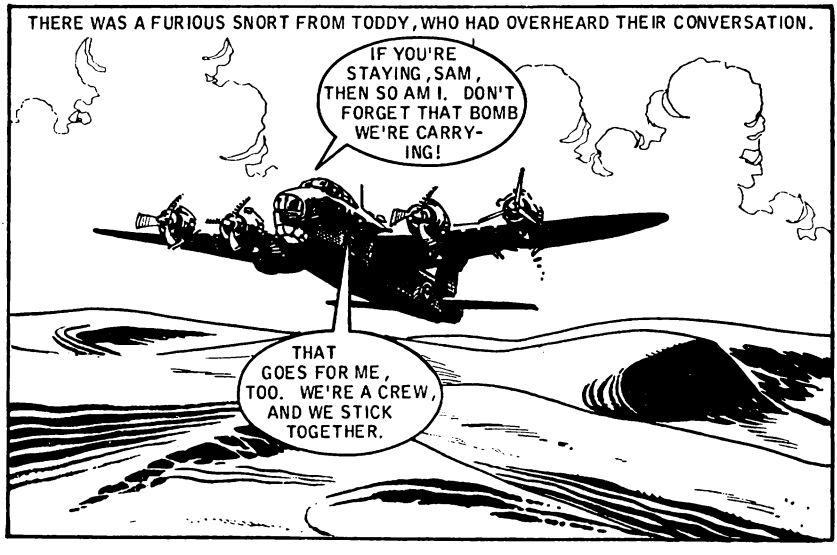

SPARE AMMUNITION, GUNS, AND EVERYTHING ELSE BULKY WENT OVER THE SIDE AS THEY STAGGERED ON.
BETTER HANG ON TO OUR PARACHUTES. WE MIGHT NEED THEM YET!
WHAT A PESSIMIST!

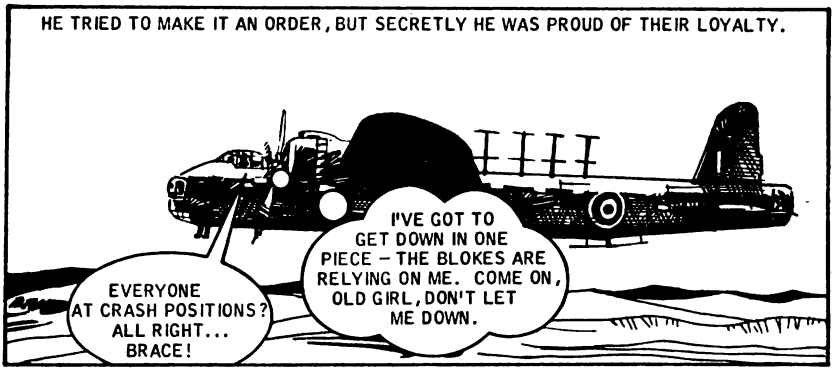

THEN TODDY MADE A STARTLING DISCOVERY. THERE WAS STILL A BOMB ON BOARD.
I CAN'T RELEASE IT, THE GEAR'S JAMMED. CAN'T WE SHAKE IT LOOSE BY BUCKING AROUND?
WE CAN'T SPARE THE FUEL, TODDY. WE'VE BARELY ENOUGH AS IT IS.

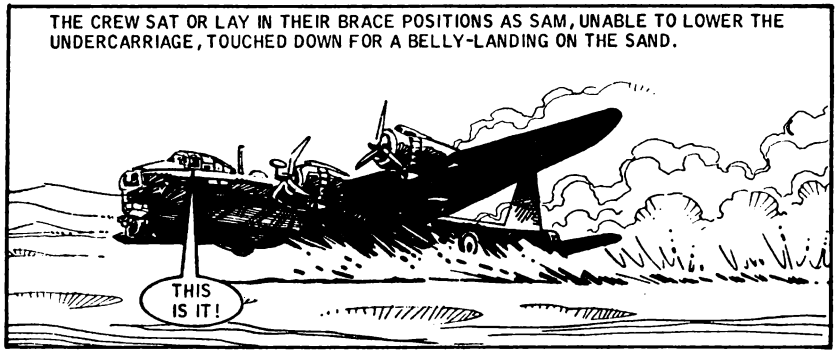

THE FRESH MISFORTUNE BROUGHT BACK ALL TODDY'S DOUBTS OF 535.
I KNEW THIS OLD CRATE WOULD BE THE DEATH OF US. WE'LL END UP SHARK-BAIT, YOU'LL SEE!
LET'S HOPE YOU'RE WRONG, TODDY. BUT WE'RE STILL A LONG WAY FROM THE COAST.

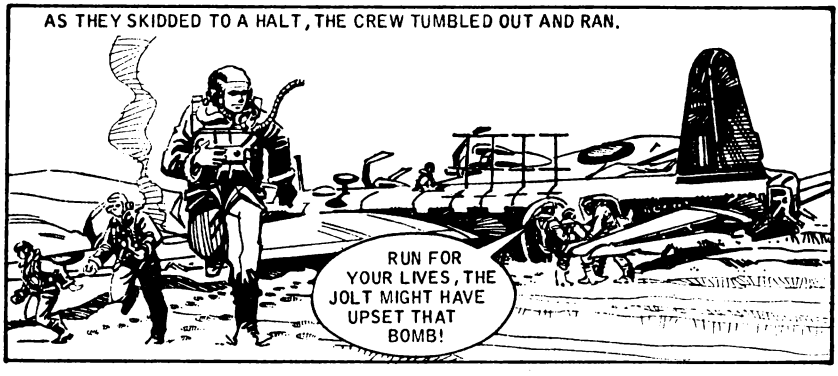

THE PETROL GAUGES WERE READING EMPTY WHEN THEY SIGHTED THE EGYPTIAN COASTLINE.
OK, EVERYONE, WE'VE ARRIVED. I'LL MAINTAIN HEIGHT WHILE YOU BALE OUT.
WHAT ABOUT YOU, SKIPPER?

SAM KNEW THAT THE DAMAGED CONTROLS WOULD FLICK THE STIRLING INTO A ROLL AS SOON AS HE LEFT THEM.
I'D NEVER MAKE IT TO THE HATCH, MATE. I'LL TRY AND GET HER DOWN SOFTLY ON THE SAND.
THEN I'M STAYING WITH YOU. YOU'LL NEED HELP TO HOLD HER STEADY.


THERE WAS A FURIOUS SNORT FROM TODDY, WHO HAD OVERHEARD THEIR CONVERSATION.
IF YOU'RE STAYING, SAM, THEN SO AM I. DON'T FORGET THAT BOMB WE'RE CARRYING!
THAT GOES FOR ME, TOO. WE'RE A CREW, AND WE STICK TOGETHER.


HE TRIED TO MAKE IT AN ORDER, BUT SECRETLY HE WAS PROUD OF THEIR LOYALTY.
EVERYONE AT CRASH POSITIONS? ALL RIGHT... BRACE!
I'VE GOT TO GET DOWN IN ONE PIECE – THE BLOKES ARE RELYING ON ME. COME ON, OLD GIRL, DON'T LET ME DOWN.


THE CREW SAT OR LAY IN THEIR BRACE POSITIONS AS SAM, UNABLE TO LOWER THE UNDERCARRIAGE, TOUCHED DOWN FOR A BELLY-LANDING ON THE SAND.
THIS IS IT!


AS THEY SKIDDED TO A HALT, THE CREW TUMBLED OUT AND RAN.
RUN FOR YOUR LIVES, THE JOLT MIGHT HAVE UPSET THAT BOMB!

THEY HAD BARELY PUT A SAFE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THE BOMB WHEN...
THERE SHE GOES!
THAT MUST BE ABOUT THE UNLUCKIEST KITE IN THE R.A.F.

TODDY SCOWLED AS HE GOT TO HIS FEET AND BRUSHED THE SAND FROM HIS CLOTHING
SHE WAS A JINX RIGHT TO THE END. THAT BOMB COULD HAVE BLOWN US ALL APART!
BUT IT DIDN'T. BESIDES, I GAVE YOU A CHANCE TO BALE OUT.

TODDY GLARED AT THE PARACHUTE HE HAD BROUGHT WITH HIM IN HIS DASH FOR SAFETY. THEN...

FOR ONCE TODDY HAD NO COMMENT TO MAKE. BUT ON THEIR RETURN TO ENGLAND, WHEN AS A REWARD FOR THEIR SUCCESSFUL ATTACK ON THE ADMIRAL EISEN THEY WERE GIVEN A POSTING TO A HALIFAX SQUADRON, HE WAS THE ONE WHO SUGGESTED THE EMBLEM THAT ADORNED THE NOSE OF THEIR NEW AIRCRAFT.

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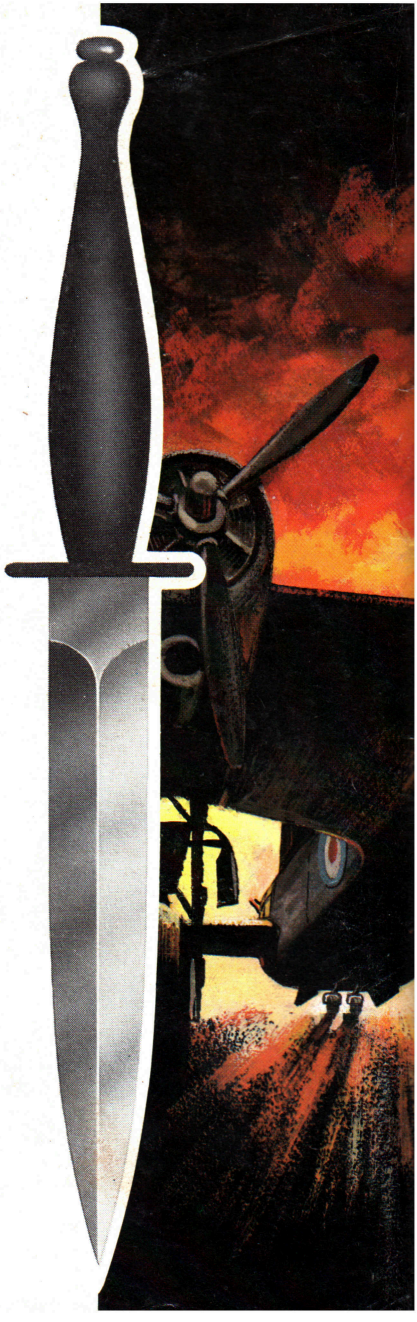
Stars of Snooker —
Cliff Thorburn

A STIRLING CALLED SATAN

It was dead unlucky, that Stirling bomber. Flying low it would catch most of the flak, flying high it was certain to be pounced on by enemy fighters. Every time the crew set off on another mission they wondered if it was going to be their last. Even its number, five-three-five, added up to thirteen . . .



Commando